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THE PERFECT ANIMAL: A STUDY OF THE QUEST FOR  
WHOLENESS OF BEING IN TENNYSON

by

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Perfect Animal: A Study of the Quest for Wholeness of Being in Tennyson submitted by Douglas Bitner Nilsson in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.





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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Introduction .....	1
I "The Worm Within the Rose" .....	9
II Honour in Dishonour; Perfection in Imperfection .....	41
III The Reach Through Darkness .....	77
Footnotes .....	105
Bibliography .....	106



## ABSTRACT

The title for this thesis is taken from Tennyson's The Princess, and for good reason. It suggests the central theme of the thesis, namely the poet's quest for perfection and wholeness in a fragmentary and imperfect world. The quest involves, primarily, various unions: the union of art with social morality, of man with woman, of man with man, and of man's psyche with his "passions and capacities."

Considerable attention is given, in the thesis, to The Princess, a sadly neglected poem, but much more central to Tennyson's major themes than most critics realize. It is not a story of female rights, as many suppose, nor primarily a story of illusions, although all of these things are involved in the poem. The central theme is one of a quest, not for the Holy Grail, but for wholeness of being. It is a theme which is central to many of Tennyson's major poems, and therefore The Princess is considered as a work of central importance.

Using two of Tennyson's most important poems--the Idylls and The Princess--as a foundation, I will discuss others of Tennyson's poems in the thesis, to point out corresponding themes and patterns which pervade the poetry of Tennyson.





## INTRODUCTION

"They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."<sup>1</sup> Thus said Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified because he claimed to be the Redeemer of mankind. He knew, if anyone ever has known it, the meaning of wholeness, being the one whole and perfect individual in the midst of centuries of decay, sickness, and fragmentary men and women. His mission was one of healing and restoration, from beginning to end. According to the Scriptural record, he healed the sick, raised the dead, gave sight to blind and spiritual light to those who sat in darkness. Whether or not we accept all that is written of him, we cannot deny the profundity of his influence. He was not a poet by profession, yet probably the most profound of all poets; not a schooled philosopher, yet the most influential of all philosophers; not a professional diplomat, yet the greatest master of diplomacy; not a trained physician, yet the greatest healer the world has known.

Most of the great poets seem to have felt some kind of affinity for Christ, or for the basic principles underlying His life and teachings. The poet is something of a seer and prophet, in a very real sense. He beholds the ultimate vision of perfection, or a portion of it, more clearly than other men, but he also sees the flaws, the faults, more clearly; and if he is a true poet, he will strive to somehow bridge the gap between the imperfection he sees and the



perfection he intuitively feels is possible. Tennyson was such a poet. He could soar with the enjoyment of the solitary eagle amid the splendours of his poetic imagination, but he was not content to remain thus alone among the clouds of heaven. There is manifested throughout much of the poetry of Tennyson, in fact, a strong sense of moral obligation, a sense of a duty to man which could only be discharged through his poetic gift. In spite of his natural tendency to withdraw from the world of petty contentions, shallow goals and selfish acts, to a world of lotus-eaters, where one might be lulled incessantly by the music of one's own imagination and senses, he chose to rise above self and strive against the wave.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, Tennyson is unlike the Romantic poet, Coleridge, who is an example of a poet who gave greater heed to the voice of the "lotus-eaters", or the still voice of his own lime-tree bower, than to the voice of action and duty in the cause of humanity.\* As a result, he lived out his comparatively short life without attaining to any real sense of fulfilment. There are undoubtedly many factors which hindered his fulfilment, such as his ill health, his unhappy marriage, and his addiction to opium; but, over and above these detriments, Coleridge was continually haunted by a "sense of Duty unperformed"<sup>3</sup>, which could not be shut out from his presence even by the thick walls of his garden or the deep seclusion of his beloved books.

Although Tennyson also suffered, for many years, from the lack of inward stability and wholeness, his unhappiness did not stem from

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\* I say this not as a moral judgment, but to point out what Coleridge himself recognized.



"duty unperformed." He recognized early in his career that a certain moral obligation is inherent in the gift of genius, and that art, besides delighting and entertaining the public--or delighting the artist himself--must also teach and inspire. The Victorians particularly felt that the poet, in an age of unbelief and spiritual darkness, must be a prophet; he must be the interpreter of the "writing on the wall", and must proclaim, through the trumpet of his poetry, the impending results of the ways of men. Not all poets are equal to the responsibility and challenge of such a calling. The tendency of most is to shrink from the weight of it, like the prophet Jonas, and retire into seclusion, to feast upon the gourd of self-indulgence, only to see it wither before their eyes. Some poets, no doubt, see no moral responsibility at all in connection with their gifts. The tendency of modern poets, such as the late Wallace Stevens, is to reject any notions of moral obligation; and some seem determined to undermine what little sense of morality society still possesses. But such poets can never attain to greatness, because they fail to rise above themselves. To be great, a poet must somehow rise above his insular world of private sensations and narrow or mundane thoughts; he must become as Arthur's knights of the Round Table;

. . .for every knight  
 Believed himself a greater than himself,  
 And every follower eyed him as a God;  
 Till he, being lifted up beyond himself,  
 Did mightier deeds than elsewhere he had done,  
 And so the realm was made. ("Guinevere", 671-6)

The key to rising above the self is, paradoxically, to lose the self, either through a combination of faith and humble obedience, or through





some other means. This is a concept which Tennyson reiterates on many occasions, often by implication. Only when one rises above himself can he behold the light "Strike on the Mount of Vision" ("The Ancient Sage", 285). The light which poets such as Tennyson and Browning beheld--though with Tennyson it was after much difficult climbing--is that of faith in an ultimate purpose beyond the multiple immoral purposes of men; faith in a goal beyond the seemingly meaningless goal of physical deterioration and death. It is this sense of an ultimate good toward which "the whole creation moves" (In Memoriam CXXI) which infuses the poetry of Tennyson and his contemporary with a depth and universality which many still recognize. Though the poet may fail, like King Arthur in the Idylls, to redeem those who have not yet climbed the "Mount of Vision", he must nevertheless make the attempt to

. . . arouse the sensual from their sleep  
Of Death, and win the vacant and the vain  
To noble raptures.<sup>4</sup>

For it is in the power of great literature to redeem mankind, though perhaps in a limited sense, that it possesses a kinship with the teachings of Christ.

The great poets are those who not only rise above themselves but also raise mankind to a greater understanding of themselves. Shakespeare, in his plays, sought to hold a "mirror up to nature",<sup>5</sup> meaning nature in the broad sense, to reveal to man all the vast disparity between that which is most noble and that which is most base in him; to open the deep abyss of hell for the viewing of all, but also to part the clouds and show us glimpses of the mysteries of



Heaven as they are revealed in the personalities of men and women. Milton sought even more explicitly, if not more earnestly, to reveal the great opposites to which man may ultimately attain, and the paths leading to each of these opposites. But Tennyson seems to have been concerned, more than either of these, with establishing some kind of harmony between these opposites, as they exist externally and within man himself. Tennyson's "negative capability", to use a Keatsian term, was not as pronounced as it is in certain other poets, if indeed it existed in him at all. In other words, Tennyson could not live "in gusto"<sup>6</sup> with the foul as well as the fair; he was too much of a prophet for that. He could only find peace by attempting to reconcile the opposites within the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of man's nature. An attempt at such a reconciliation was essential to his own sanity and well-being; and much of his poetry, as we shall see, was concerned with the struggle involved in attempting to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable opposites, such as man's baser and higher natures. He was concerned, also, with the union and reconciliation between man and man, between man and woman, and between man and God. Man is by nature at odds with all of these, to some degree; and insofar as he is at odds with any one of these, or with Nature and the universe, he is at odds with himself. The union of man's soul with his intellect and his passions is often, if not always, the result of other kinds of union; because as soon as a man achieves a harmonious and satisfactory union between himself and woman, or between himself and his fellow men, or between himself and God, he automatically becomes more unified and whole within himself.





His head and heart become harmoniously reconciled to each other; his baser self becomes more refined and pure, and thus becomes one with his higher self. His mind is then no longer at enmity with his soul or his emotions. He becomes a complete and unified being.

Paramount in the quest for wholeness is love--love in the more earthly sense of the word and also in the broader, more universal sense. Love is the mortar which makes a fruitful union between human beings possible, and it is the essence which alone can lead one to a faith in a higher purpose beyond the finite purposes of men. On the other hand, pride, selfishness, hate, or any other quality or factor which separates or alienates man from his fellow beings or from God is destructive and malignant. It is a "scorpion-worm that twists in hell/And stings itself to everlasting death" ("The last Tournament" 450-51).

Because of the complex and often paradoxical and contradictory nature of life, man, society and the universe, the achievement of oneness and wholeness is also complex and varied; but it involves certain basic patterns which can be traced through many of Tennyson's poems; and it will be the central concern of this thesis to trace these patterns and expand their meanings through various levels of interpretation and various levels of human experience. It should be remembered, however, that Tennyson is not always successful in showing his readers how all of the various unions mentioned above can be made a reality. In most cases, perhaps because of his own long struggle for spiritual and mental wholeness, he is more effective in showing us the results of failure to achieve one or more of these



unions. "The Lady of Shalott", "Tithonus", "Mariana", "The Palace of Art", and even the Idylls, are examples of poems which illustrate a lack of wholeness, or even the opposite of it--poems of desolation, isolation, dissipation, and sickness of soul. It is perhaps remarkable that so many of Tennyson's poems should deal with loneliness, isolation, and rejection, and that complete happiness and wholeness are not achieved in any of his best-known poems, with the exception of The Princess and the more doubtful exception of In Memoriam. Even In Memoriam leaves us with some doubts concerning Tennyson's reunion with Hallam and his apparent reconciliation to the heartrending opposites of human existence. Nevertheless, in all of the major poems and many of the minor ones, there is a striving toward union and wholeness, and in most of them the goal is at least partially achieved. In In Memoriam, which reflects Tennyson's personal quest for wholeness, as does Maud, the fulfilment he seeks can never be achieved without a literal, face-to-face reunion with the departed Hallam. A union of a kind is achieved, but it is transitory and only partially satisfying; yet it is sufficient to create a more wholesome state of mind within the poet--a state of optimism which is reflected in most of the sections of In Memoriam after XCV, and notably also in "The Ancient Sage". A similar pattern can be seen in "Locksley Hall" and Maud, although in each of these poems the beloved is a woman.

Finally, the quest for wholeness, and perfection involves a certain principle of evolution--not that set forth in The Origin of Species, but a spiritual and moral evolution culminating in "the



Christ that is to be" (In Memoriam CVI), the perfect man, of whom Hallam and King Arthur are types or symbols. The evolution of immortal man, or man who has become "more than man" ("The Ancient Sage" 257), may be linear; he may move in a straight and undeviating course from one state to another. But the evolution of earthly man is cyclical, and must be seen from a high perspective; for though, to our limited vision, things crumble into dust and remain there, to Tennyson this is not so. Out of the bones of the old order comes new life, and each rebirth brings man closer to that "one far-off divine event,/ To which the whole creation moves" (In Memoriam epilogue). Moreover, man's earthly progression should lead him, ideally, to the "Mount of Vision", to a glimpse, at least, of that which lies beyond life; whereas to the immortal man, of whom Hallam and King Arthur are representative, the vision is the reality, and that which to mortal man is reality is to him perhaps only a dream.

Although Tennyson achieved glimpses of the ideal, his faith never attained to the robust optimism of Browning. Nevertheless, Tennyson, too, had his "infinite moments"; and his glimpses into the ultimate have opened the heavens wide enough for us to hope for that which appears to be, in this life, unattainable.





## CHAPTER I

### "THE WORM WITHIN THE ROSE"

Tennyson's Idylls of the King are very much concerned with the quest for wholeness of being, or more specifically, with the frustration of that quest. Most of the characters in the poem strive toward wholeness, but because they reject wisdom and direction, few of them succeed in becoming truly whole or more perfected. Galahad is seemingly an exception; yet even his achievement leaves something to be desired, as King Arthur recognizes ("The Holy Grail" 896-7). Arthur, the "blameless" king, also strives toward wholeness; for, though he is perfect in the sense of being blameless or sinless, he knows that he is imperfect in that he is not complete. Thus, while other characters in the Idylls are striving to become what Arthur is, Arthur himself is striving to become something better than he is. Whereas the direction of the striving of Arthur's knights is upward, away from common man, Arthur's striving is downward, toward a union with mankind. Arthur's movement is definitely toward wholeness, and therefore essentially positive and upward. He realizes that man achieves wholeness through union with his kind, and not through attempting to escape them. On the other hand, many of the knights, such as Percivale and Galahad, aspire to raise themselves above mankind, to set themselves apart in an insulated kind of spirituality; and in so doing, they move away from wholeness even while they think





they are moving toward it. For this reason, Arthur belongs to a separate pattern which can be traced through a number of Tennyson's poems, and which involves a downward movement which is actually upward. This pattern will become evident in the next chapter as we examine Arthur's dilemma in relation to the plight of other characters in others of Tennyson's poems. What we will be mainly concerned with in this present chapter is the movement away from wholeness in the Idylls--a movement which, as we have indicated, runs contrary to what Arthur is striving for, though, on the surface, most of the characters are striving for the same things: wholeness and happiness.

Almost all of the "wandering fires" which the characters in the Idylls blindly follow are the result of the poison of various kinds of infidelity, the most prominent and central of which is moral and sexual infidelity. One by one, the members of Arthur's Court abandon him for the sake of following their own distorted and illusory dreams of fulfilment. The Queen and Lancelot set the tide of adultery, infidelity, and self-indulgence in motion, and from them it spreads, like a tidal wave, to the furthest parts of the kingdom. And when the "wave" has reached the utmost shores of the kingdom, it turns back upon the senders and upon all who belong to Arthur's Order, and virtually destroys their hopes for a "whole" society or for personal happiness. Moral infidelity leads to other kinds of unfaithfulness, and even the seemingly holy quests for the Grail are manifestations of unfaithfulness to what Arthur represents, as this chapter will attempt to illustrate.

Since Arthur's limitations and failings will be studied in



Chapter II, we will not attempt to analyze his character here. The Queen's faults, on the other hand, are more blatant and need not be enumerated either, since they will become obvious as our discussion progresses. In this present chapter, let it suffice to say that, although Arthur attempts to become one with his Queen, he never succeeds in doing so in more than a superficial sense. Basically, the problem is this: the Queen refuses to attempt to climb to a level nearer Arthur's, and Arthur refuses, or else is unable, to lower himself to a more intimate understanding of his wife. The Queen therefore turns, in the emptiness of loneliness, to Lancelot, to whom she is attracted from their first meeting. The eventual illicit union of these two, however, fails to lead to wholeness or perfection in either party. On the contrary, it leads to corruption and degradation both within themselves and within the kingdom. At one point, Guinevere sees, in a dream, the far-reaching effects of her personal corruption. Haunted like the guilty soul in "The Palace of Art", or like Mariana in the moated grange, she dreams of the "dolorous day to be" ("The Last Tournament" 593):

Henceforward, too, the Powers that tend the soul,  
 To help it from the death that cannot die,  
 And save it even in extremes, began  
 To vex and plague her. Many a time for hours,  
 Beside the placid breathings of the King,  
 In the dead night, grim faces came and went,  
 Before her, or a vague spiritual fear--  
 Like to some doubtful noise of creaking doors,  
 Heard by the watcher of a haunted house,  
 That keeps the rust of murder on the walls--  
 Held her awake; or if she slept she dream'd  
 An awful dream, for then she seem'd to stand  
 On some vast plain before a setting sun,  
 And from the sun there swiftly made at her



A ghastly something, and its shadow flew  
 Before it till it touch'd her, and she turn'd--  
 When lo! her own, that broadening from her feet,  
 And blackening, swallowed all the land, and in it  
 Far cities burnt, and with a cry she woke.

("Guinevere" 64-82 Underlining mine)

The last few lines of this passage are reminiscent of the ending of Tennyson's "Oenone", in which the fires of Troy, symbolic both of the fires of lust and the fires of Hell, are seen emanating from the unwise union of Helen and Paris. Moreover, the "ghastly something" which flies at Guinevere from the low sun (Lancelot) is the not-so-secret sin which stands between her and any kind of real fulfilment.

It is perhaps worthwhile to note that the disintegration of Arthur's Order is depicted not only in terms of wars and contentions, but also in terms of musical harmony and its opposite, discord. What Merlin says of Camelot is significant, particularly in the light of the old saying, "Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast." When Gareth approaches the gates of the mysterious city for the first time, Merlin speaks to him of Camelot in terms of music:

For an ye heard a music, like enow  
 They are building still, seeing the city is built  
 To music, therefore never built at all,  
 And therefore built forever. ("Gareth and Lynette"  
 270-274)

Enigmatic and paradoxical as this statement is, it is important in terms of what Arthur and Camelot stand for. The city is built not so much upon stone as upon principles and spiritual ideals; and these ideals and principles can only exist where there is harmony, the symbol of which is music. The city is built forever--that is, endlessly and unceasingly--because the principles for which Arthur stands





are eternal and are not intended to be temporary innovations; yet the city is never built at all, because the work of progression in righteousness is never done. Arthur can never stand back and say that his city is complete, because man's progress must never come to a standstill. The moment man's moral and spiritual progression stops, the city ceases to exist, just as music ceases to exist as soon as the player ceases to play, for it is built upon an intangible foundation. Thus, when the spiritual principles for which Arthur stands are finally dead or withdrawn, along with "Innocence" ("The Last Tournament" 218), there is really nothing left of Camelot but a heap of rubble. The city ceases to exist when harmony, or united interaction under righteous law, ceases to exist.

It is the discordant music of an adulterous race that breaks up Arthur's music. The fool Dagonet rightly accuses Tristram of making "broken music" in "The Last Tournament" (258). When Tristram asks him to explain his accusation, Dagonet answers that Tristram has broken

'Arthur, the King's;  
For when thou playest that air with Queen Isolt,  
Thou makest broken music with thy bride,  
Her daintier namesake down in Brittany--  
And so thou breakest Arthur's music too.' ("The  
Last Tournament" 262-266)

Tristram's broken music of adultery is diametrically opposed to Arthur's music, and causes discord. Whereas Arthur's music is designed for building up, Tristram's is only useful for tearing down, as the fool tells him. When Tristram speaks of the "Paynim bard" who "could harp his wife up out of hell" (228), the fool turns



on the ball of his foot and says:

'And whither harpest thou thine? down! and thyself  
Down! and two more; a helpful harper thou,  
That harpest downward!' (330-32)

All of this has little effect on Tristram, who takes these sayings as the words of a fool, and not as the truth which they are. Through the discordant music of Tristram's adulterous ways, and those of others like him, including the Queen, Camelot has ceased to be built to music. The only heavenly music which exists, toward the end of Arthur's reign, is the music of Arthur's star, which can only be heard by Arthur, his wise fool, and the angels ("The Last Tournament" 350). To all others, whose spiritual ears have become blunted through sensuality, Arthur's music has ceased, and in its place has come Vivien's song of the exaltation of the senses, and Tristram's wearisome croonings about "free love" ("The Last Tournament" 275 ff).

Even before the more visible fall of Arthur's Order, the "broken music" of adultery hinders spiritual communication. When the nun who first seeks the Holy Grail seeks spiritual revelation, she fails, because

the scandal of the Court  
Sin against Arthur and the Table Round,  
And the strange sound of an adulterous race,  
Across the iron grating of her cell  
Beat, and she pray'd and fasted all the more.  
("The Holy Grail" 78-82 Underlining mine)

Because of her determination and unworldliness, the nun is successful in her spiritual quest, in spite of the opposition of worldliness around her, with its clanging discord which, to those such as Vivien and Tristram, is music, because it pleases their sensual ears. They



love chaos and discord because these destroy law, and it is against law that Vivien and Tristram are rebelling, in order to gratify their baser natures.

When I say that the nun is successful, I mean that she succeeds, eventually, in catching a glimpse of the Holy Grail. She does not succeed, however, in healing the world of its wickedness, in spite of the seemingly great revelation she receives. Rather, her vision has the opposite effect, for she inspires the knights to embark on separate and individual quests for further manifestations of the Grail. Like the great Crusades of which we read in history, these quests begin nobly enough, but degenerate into essentially selfish and fruitless endeavours. Since the division of the knights is one of the final blows which leads to the disintegration of Arthur's Order, it becomes clear that even religiousness can be harmful when it comes in the form of extreme asceticism, which is, at best, an escape rather than a solution. Though Arthur praises the nun, Percivale, and Galahad for their susceptibility to spiritual manifestations, he does not praise any of his followers for the way in which they react to their visions; nor does he praise the principles involved in the quest for the Grail.

Those who undertake the quest for the Grail, instead of becoming one with their kind, become isolated from their fellow beings; and if they attain to any kind of spiritual wholeness, it is of a false and deceptive kind, as Mr. Friesen has made clear in his thesis entitled "Deception in Tennyson's Idylls of the King."<sup>1</sup> Or, if the wholeness achieved is not altogether false and deceptive in





every case, it is at least very limited, as in the case of Lancelot. Lancelot succeeds, through his feverous and tortured quest, in severing himself from the Queen, and in so doing, he supposedly separates the noble in himself from the sin which had infested his soul. He therefore dies "a holy man" ("Lancelot and Elaine" 1418), according to Tennyson; but his sin has already done irreparable damage to himself, to Elaine, to Arthur, to the Queen, and to the kingdom as a whole. Moreover, we find, near the close of Arthur's reign, that Lancelot has waged "bitter war" ("Guinevere" 431) against the King. The King is smitten by his own "right arm". This latter fact casts a shadow of doubt upon the sincerity of Lancelot's repentance, and certainly upon the usefulness of his quest for the Grail; for, far from repairing the evil he has done against the King, he wars against him openly and deliberately, which is perhaps worse than the inadvertent damage which he does through his relationship with Guinevere.

Guinevere also repents of her sins, and, in a sense, embarks on a quest to recover her lost virtue; but her repentance comes too late to do any good to anyone except herself and the nuns with whom she spends the last few years of her mortal life. The little girl at the convent sings a song which stabs Guinevere to the heart, because she knows, or strongly fears, that the words of the song are true:

Late, late, so late! and dark the night and chill!  
Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.  
Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

No light had we; for that we do repent.  
And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.  
Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.





No light! so late! and dark and chill the night!  
 O, let us in, that we may find the light!  
 Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?  
 O let us in, that we may find the light!  
 Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.  
 ("Guinevere" 166-176)

The Queen is doubly stabbed within her conscience as the young, innocent girl babbles a further truth about Lancelot. When the Queen declares that "manners are not idle, but the fruit/ Of loyal nature and of noble mind" (333-34), the girl replies:

Then Lancelot's needs must be a thousand fold  
 Less noble, being, as all rumour runs,  
 The most disloyal friend in all the world. (336-38)

Guinevere knows full well that truth has come from the mouth of a babe, yet she seeks to ease her conscience by retorting thus:

O, closed about by narrowing nunnery-walls,  
 What knowest thou of the world and all its lights  
 And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe? (340-42)

Guinevere is right in assuming that the young girl knows nothing of the good and evil of the world through personal experience; but she is wrong, and knows she is wrong, in accusing the girl of not knowing whereof she speaks. For, to the innocent mind of the young girl, the corruption of Arthur's kingdom through disloyalty and adultery appears in all its stark ugliness. Her perception has not been dulled by the bombarding elements of worldly experience. Later, after the final visit of Arthur, the Queen repents more fully and humbles herself completely, but she is haunted to her grave by the echo of the song of the young girl: "Is it yet too late?" Whatever fate may await her in the spiritual world, she knows that it is most certainly too



late to accomplish the great good that she might have accomplished on earth, had she helped and not hindered Arthur's cause.

In view of the spreading corruption which emanates from the union of Lancelot and Guinevere, it is significant that both unions in which the Queen becomes involved are fruitless in terms of children, as in the other ways we have suggested. Her union with the King is fruitless, because a real union never actually happens between the King and Queen; it is a union in form only, as we shall see more fully in Chapter II. However, the union of the Queen with Lancelot, though warm and passionate in the extreme, is equally fruitless, because the poisonous influence of their impurity and their unfaithfulness to the King blights everything that they touch or have any association with, including themselves. The one child that the Queen is privileged to own--an orphan that is found deserted in an eagle's nest--soon dies inexplicably, despite the Queen's tenderest care ("The Last Tournament" 26-28). Just as, in The Princess, Psyche's child becomes a symbol of the fruits of happiness and love resulting from a righteous union between man and woman, so the child in this instance becomes a symbol of the death of innocence and the blighting effects of illicit passion. At his last meeting with Guinevere, Arthur refers both with relief and with deep regret to their childless relationship:

Well is it that no child is born of thee.  
 The children that are born of thee are sword and fire,  
 Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,  
 The craft of kindred and the godless hosts  
 Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea.  
 ("Guinevere" 422-25)

The children born of Guinevere are the fruits of lust, not love. Love



is unselfish and directed toward others; but the Queen prolongs her relationship with Lancelot for purely selfish reasons. It may be that Lancelot bears the greater portion of the guilt, because he would not listen when Guinevere urged him to leave the kingdom, before the scandal became common knowledge ("Guinevere" 87 ff). However, we have only to turn to "Balin and Balan" to find equally strong evidence against the Queen, as we shall see further on.

The death of the child which is placed in the Queen's care is foreshadowed by the experience of Percivale in "The Holy Grail". In his quest for the Grail, he encounters five different visionary scenes which, one by one, crumble into dust before his eyes. The third scene, which is particularly significant, is described thus:

And then behold a woman at the door  
 Spinning; and fair the house whereby she sat,  
 And kind the woman's eyes and innocent,  
 And all her bearing gracious; and she rose  
 Opening her arms to meet me, as who should say,  
 "Rest here;" but when I touched her, lo! she, too,  
 Fell into dust and nothing, and the house  
 Became no better than a broken shed,  
 And in it a dead babe; and also this  
 Fell into dust, and I was left alone.

("The Holy Grail" 391-400)

It is evident that Percivale does not understand the symbolic significance of this scene; he is bewildered by it, as he is by his other visions, and only concludes that the quest is not for him. What is actually meant to be a warning to him, he takes to be a punishment. He does not realize that the waste land in which he repeatedly finds himself after his visions is not only the waste





land of his own spiritual and moral inadequacy, but the spiritual emptiness of his quest and of the kingdom to which he belongs.

We have already questioned the value of the quests for the Grail in the Idylls, and Percivale's can be taken as typical. Although he manages to get a glimpse of the "spiritual city" ("The Holy Grail" 526), and also of the coveted Holy Grail, there is a certain emptiness about his spiritual achievement. Ambrosius senses this fact, and asks, "Came ye on none but phantoms in your quest,/ No man, no woman?" (562-63) and Percivale replies: "All men, to one so bound by such a vow,/ And women were as phantoms" (564-65). Percivale's statement reminds us of the strange fits of the Prince in The Princess; for the hollow shows which the misguided Percivale sees are in fact the reality, and the things which to him are the most real are the hollow shows. He passes by an opportunity for real fulfilment because he mistakes it for a temptation, which in fact it is not. He tells Ambrosius that, lighting upon a "goodly town" in his quest for the Grail, he chanced to meet his childhood sweetheart, a Princess. He also found that her love toward him had not diminished:

And while I tarried, every day she set  
A banquet richer than the day before  
By me, for all her longing and her will  
Was toward me as of old; till one fair morn,  
I walking to and fro beside a stream  
That flash'd across her orchard underneath



Her castle-walls, she stole upon my walk,  
 And calling me the greatest of all knights,  
 Embraced me, and so kiss'd me, the first time,  
 And gave herself and all her wealth to me.

("The Holy Grail" 587-596)

Immediately, however, Percivale remembers the warning of Arthur that "most of us would follow wandering fires" (598), and he concludes that what is being presented to him is one of those false fires. Therefore, in spite of the pleadings of the Princess and her people, he determines to resist. He tells Ambrosius:

O me, my brother! but one night my vow  
 Burnt me within, so that I rose and fled,  
 But wail'd and wept, and hated mine own self,  
 And even the holy quest, and all but her;  
 Then after I was join'd with Galahad  
 Cared not for her nor anything upon earth.

(605-11)

Percivale, like most of the other knights and like Ida in The Princess, takes "true for false" and "false for true" ("Geraint and Enid" 4). What he does not realize is that his quest, because of its very nature, is the "wandering fire" of which Arthur speaks, and not the offer of the young Princess. In the light of what Arthur says elsewhere in the Idylls ("Guinevere" 474 ff), it becomes clear that



Percivale, in making the decision that he does, not only denies himself the opportunity to achieve true fulfilment, but denies the Princess the same opportunity, and perhaps her subjects also. Moreover, in "caring not for her nor anything on earth", he entirely misapprehends the spirit of Christianity. It is precisely because Christ cared "for anything on earth" that he died upon the cross. To assume, as some ministers have done, that one must cease to love earthly creatures in order to love God, is an illusion. No fulfilment can come from that kind of self-denial, although self-denial of a different kind definitely has a place in the quest for wholeness, as we shall see in the course of this thesis.

One of the most important ways in which Percivale and the other knights go wrong is that they bind themselves to vows and quests of their own making. Arthur is the spiritual leader of his kingdom, yet none of the knights consult with him before making their vows and embarking upon their quests for the Grail. Yet, once their vows have been made, they cling to them more tenaciously than if they were defending Arthur himself. Gawain, of course, is an exception, since he lacks the character to cling to any vow that inconveniences him. Most of the knights, however, become like Lancelot, whose "honor rooted in dishonor stood,/ And faith unfaithful made him falsely true" ("Lancelot and Elaine" 871-72). They imagine that they are upholding honor by clinging to their false loyalties, but in fact they tear it down, or harp it downward, like Tristram, because their honour is rooted in the dishonor of disobedience to higher law, the representative of which is Arthur. So it is, in particular, with Lancelot,





whose experience with the young and innocent Elaine is parallel to Percivale's encounter with the young Princess. Lancelot also clings to his false loyalty to the Queen, and in so doing betrays himself, Elaine, Arthur, and his kingdom. What Arthur says about Lancelot, after the latter has disguised his identity at the tournament, is true. He says to Guinevere:

Far lovelier in our Lancelot had it been,  
In lieu of idly dallying with the truth,  
To have trusted me as he hath trusted thee.  
("Lancelot and Elaine" 586-89)

Earlier in the Idylls, Geraint also makes up his own rules about honor and clings to them tenaciously. He embarks upon a meaningless quest "Of honor, where no honor can be gain'd" ("Geraint and Enid" 703), and makes up rules for his wife's conduct which, if strictly obeyed, would have cost him all that he had, including his life. Fortunately, Enid has the common sense to disobey her husband, for she realizes that there is no honor in keeping silent, as she was commanded to do, when her husband's life is in danger. Her dishonor, thus, is rooted in honor, for she breaks the letter of the law in order to keep the spirit of it, as Psyche does in The Princess (Part Second 272-79). Geraint, unfortunately, is too stupid to see his wife's wisdom until he has caused her considerable discomfort and humiliation. Enid is wiser than most of the knights, in that she refuses to become bound to empty vows which stifle fulfilment rather than encourage it.

Geraint is an example of a knight who is touched, momentarily, with the taint of the scandal of the Court, but who manages to rise





above it, with the help of his angelic and patient wife. There are many others in the Idylls, however, who never do recover from the taint of adultery which spreads through the kingdom. Elaine is one of these. Her death, which is the direct result of Lancelot's false loyalty to Guinevere, is another example of the death of "Innocence," and another manifestation of the blighting influence of the illicit passion between Lancelot and Guinevere. The most tragic aspect of the story of Lancelot and Elaine is not the latter's death, but Lancelot's pathetic inability to respond to her love and to her outstanding physical and spiritual qualities. Gawain loves her physical perfection, but is blind to her spirituality. Lancelot is able to love her as a sister, but the "strange" sin which has grown up within him has destroyed his capacity to love in any fulfilling way. The woman who might once have made him a whole and complete man, rather than one divided against himself, is not able to heal the wound within him, because it has grown too deep and festered too long. She heals his body, but she cannot heal his soul, even with love. Nor can the Queen, to whom he remains loyal, heal his inner wound. She possesses only the power to deepen the wound, not to heal it. Like the "worm within the rose", she kills those who would enjoy the beauty of the flower. The song which troubles Pelleas ("Pelleas and Ettare" 389-90) could well serve as Lancelot's theme-song and the focal point of this chapter:

A rose, but one, none other rose had I,  
 A rose, one rose, and this was wondrous fair,  
 One rose, a rose that gladden'd earth and sky,  
 One rose, my rose, that sweeten'd all mine air--  
 I cared not for the thorns; the thorns were there.



One rose, a rose to gather by and by,  
 One rose, a rose, to gather and to wear,  
 No rose but one--what other rose had I?  
 One rose, my rose; a rose that will not die,--  
 He dies who loves it,--if the worm be there.  
 (391-400)

Guinevere is both the rose and the worm within the rose--and "worm" evidently means "serpent" as well as the ordinary meaning. She is the worm within the flower of Arthur's Order, within the flower of Lancelot's knighthood, and within the flower of innocent love. But she is also the rose itself, which, from Tennyson's point of view, both attracts and kills. Because of her influence, Guinevere is akin to Doorm, who poisons the women of his court with his brute sensuality. Tennyson describes those women thus:

While some, whose souls the old serpent long had drawn  
 Down, as the worm draws in the wither'd leaf,  
 And makes it earth, hiss'd each at other's ear  
 What shall not be recorded.... ("Geraint and Enid"  
 631-34)

Similarly, Lancelot receives of Guinevere's poison and passes some of it on, unintentionally, to Elaine; who, being made of less invulnerable stuff than either Geraint or Lancelot, dies of it. Yet her death, ironically, is her salvation, for death is sweet to the innocent and life is bitter. Lancelot's death, on the other hand, is inward and bitter. Whereas Elaine is freed from the death in life which she would have suffered, like the Lady of Shalott, if she had lived, Lancelot is doomed to prolong his death in life to the end of his days.

In the meantime, the knife of Lancelot's guilt is plunged deeper into his soul, first, by the arrival of the body of Elaine at Camelot, and second, by the sorrowful words of the king, who says:



Lancelot, my Lancelot, thou in whom I have  
 Most joy and most affiance, for I know  
 What thou hast been in battle by my side,  
 And many a time have watched thee at the tilt  
 Strike down the lusty and long-practiced knight  
 And let the younger and unskill'd go by  
 To win his honor and to make his name,  
 And loved thy courtesies and thee, a man  
 Made to be loved; but now I would to God,  
 Seeing the homeless trouble in thine eyes,  
 Thou couldst have loved this maiden, shaped, it seems,  
 By God for thee alone, and from her face,  
 If one may judge the living by the dead,  
 Delicately pure and marvellously fair,  
 Who might have brought thee, now a lonely man  
 Wifeless and heirless, noble issue, sons  
 Born to the glory of thy name and fame,  
 My knight, the great Sir Lancelot of the Lake.

("Lancelot and Elaine"  
 1345-62)

But Lancelot, like his beloved, blights those who might have made him whole; and, like Guinevere, he remains childless. He clings to his illicit union with Guinevere, from which can come no good fruit.

The infidelity of the Queen and Lancelot has two main detrimental effects. In the first place, it provides those who are naturally inclined toward sensuality and rebelliousness with an excuse to gratify their base desires; and second, it has a destructive effect upon those who are noble enough to desire to do right, because it robs them of the ideal which gave them a reason to be noble. Disillusionment becomes pervasive in the Idylls as the truth about the Queen and the chief knight becomes more and more widespread. And, as the kingdom becomes divided through scandal, suspicion, and disillusionment, and through the resultant increase in immorality, individuals also become more and more divided within themselves. Lancelot, for one, is a man divided against himself, as we have already suggested. We are told that





The great and guilty love he bare the Queen,  
 In battle with the love he bare his lord,  
 Had marr'd his face, and mark'd it ere his time.  
 Another sinning on such heights with one,  
 The flower of all the west and all the world,  
 Had been the sleeker for it; but in him  
 His mood was often like a fiend, and rose  
 And drove him into wastes and solitudes  
 For agony, who was yet a living soul.

("Lancelot and Elaine" 244-252 Underlining mine)

In some of the other knights, such as Tristram and Gawain, this kind of conflict does not arise, because there is very little nobleness in their natures with which their baser passions can conflict. They are therefore content to remain in a shallow, sensual existence, "loving" while they may. But Lancelot, like certain others we will discuss, is a man of an essentially noble nature, and the baser part of him wars against his soul. Since others have dealt extensively with the conflict between sense and soul in the Idylls,<sup>2</sup> we will only point out a few of the more significant conflicts which emerge, to show how they relate to the quest for wholeness, and how they are parallel.

The story of Balin and Balan could be viewed as a dramatization and semi-externalization of the more inward conflict within Lancelot and within mankind generally. Balin is sometimes called "the Savage" ("Balin and Balan" 51), because he is subject, like Lancelot, to fits of violence which tear him inwardly, as if he were possessed by fiends. Balan, on the other hand, seems to be the embodiment of the more rational side of man's nature, and more specifically, of Balin's nature. Balin refers to Balan as "My brother and my better" (52), and confesses to Arthur:



I have not lived my life delightsomely;  
 For I that did that violence to thy thrall,  
 Had often wrought some fury on myself,  
 Saving for Balan. ("Balin and Balan" 58-61)

Having repented of his past violences, Balin is accepted back into Arthur's Order, and for a time, he moves "To music with [the] Order and the King" (74). This state of harmony and reconciliation is short-lived, however, for

after some quick burst of sudden wrath,  
 The music in him seem'd to change and grow  
 Faint and far-off. (212-14)

To make matters worse, he comes upon the man who, years before, had provoked his anger and caused his banishment; and seeing him awakens Balin's old wrath all over again. The only thing that keeps him from losing control of himself, since the restraining influence of his better self, Balan, is not with him, is the emblem of Arthur's crown on his shield. As Lancelot is long restrained from openly rebelling against the King by a vague sense of loyalty to him, so Balin is restrained by a reminder of what he himself now represents, being the King's knight. The emblem does not save him from himself indefinitely, however, any more than knightly vows save Lancelot from himself; for exterior reminders are not enough.

A little later, Balin comes upon a rendez-vous between the Queen and Lancelot, and sees a scene enacted which is parallel, in essence, to his own predicament, though he is not perceptive enough to realize it. He sees Lancelot deliberately pass by the Queen without speaking or looking her way. The Queen protests, and Lancelot explains:



Last night methought I saw  
 That maiden saint who stands with lily in hand  
 In yonder shrine. All round her prest the dark,  
 And all the light upon her silver face  
 Flow'd from the spiritual lily that she held.  
 Lo! these her emblems drew mine eyes away;  
 For see, how perfect-pure! As light a flush  
 As hardly tints the blossom of the quince  
 Would mar their charm of stainless maidenhood.  
 ("Balin and Balan" 255-63)

For a brief moment the lilies--the emblems of spirituality in Tennyson--draw the eyes of Lancelot away; but the roses, one of which is in female form, soon draw his eyes the other way, and the two lovers walk together down the path of roses, the path of sensual pleasure. Though strong in the battlefield and in the jousts, Lancelot is too weak in character to resist the sensual forces within his nature, in spite of his glimpses of the beauty of purity and spirituality. Perhaps, if Elaine had appeared at this point, while he still stood at the cross-roads, he might have been able to rise above himself; but since she does not appear, he takes the easier, downward course which leads to his destruction.

Balin looks upon the scene we have just described, and is bewildered. He either does not understand what he sees or else refuses to admit to himself that he understands:

'Queen? subject? but I see not what I see.  
 Damsel and lover? hear not what I hear.  
 My father hath begotten me in his wrath.  
I suffer from the things before me, know,  
Learn nothing; am not worthy to be knight--  
 A churl, a clown!' and in him gloom on gloom  
 Deepen'd. ("Balin and Balan" 276-281 Underlining mine)

Balin, like Lancelot and Percivale, suffers from his experiences, but learns nothing from them. He senses that something is drastically





wrong with what he has just witnessed, yet without his higher self, Balin, he does not know what, so he imputes the fault entirely to himself. He then proceeds to make the same mistake that most of the other knights eventually make:

he sharply caught his lance and shield,  
Nor stay'd to crave permission from the King,  
But mad for strange adventure, dash'd away. (282-84)

Instead of seeking the counsel of the King, he dashes away on some meaningless quest of his own.

In a fit of rage, Balin goes to the court of Pellam who, like Percivale, has renounced all earthly things for the sake of an unfulfilling kind of spirituality. There Sir Garlon, who seems to be a weaker version of Tristram, tells Balin that the Queen, though perhaps the fairest, is far from being the purest of women. This arouses Balin's ire to the extent that he almost loses control once more, but he is again stopped by the memory of the emblem on his shield. Nevertheless, his dreams are poisoned by the doubt cast upon the Queen's integrity, and he sleeps fitfully. The next day, when Sir Garlon again mocks him for his loyalty, Balin loses all control and splinters his sword upon Garlon's head. Shortly after this, while riding through the woods, he meets Vivien coming from the hall of Mark. At her approach, significantly, "the wholesome music of the wood" (430) is silenced, while Vivien's song in praise of pagan values fills the air. Later, Vivien adds her more passionate and less truthful version of the love-relationship between Lancelot and the Queen to what Balin has already seen and heard, and Balin goes completely mad; for he is unable either to differentiate



between lies and truth or to cope with evil in any form. He merely suffers blindly:

She ceased; his evil spirit upon him leapt,  
He ground his teeth together, sprang with a yell,  
Tore from the branch and cast on earth the shield,  
Drove his mail'd heel athwart the royal crown,  
Stamp'd all into defacement, hurl'd it from him  
Among the forest weeds, and cursed the tale,  
The told-of and the teller. (529-35)

At this point, Balan, who is riding nearby, hears the fiendish screams and thinks that he has found the fiend of the woods, for which he has been searching. "My quest, meseems, is here," he says (543), and there is a bitter irony in his error; for, while Balan was away chasing the shadow of some external demon, whose very existence was only a rumour, the real demon within Balin was raising havoc. His quest, therefore, was "here" all along, but like most of the other Knights, he fails to realize this until it is too late. He makes essentially the same mistake, also, as Arthur does, who fails to recognize that his greatest enemies are within himself and within those closest to him.

Descending upon his own brother, Balan is killed by the spear which Balin has stolen from amongst the religious relics of King Pellam; and Balin, falling under his own horse, is crushed physically. Thus the two blindly destroy each other; and from another point of view, each destroys himself. The higher man, Balan, is unable to redeem "the Savage" either in himself or in his brother, because he has allowed the passions to be separated too long from the governing powers of the mind and soul. And thus the two opposing natures, instead of assisting each other, destroy each



other. This, in essence, is the story of Arthur and his knights in miniature. Unless a state of harmony can be achieved between the head and the heart, or the soul and the passions, the final result can only be failure or destruction. But there is yet another dimension here. For it is by Pellam's spear--the emblem of false religion--that Balan is killed. The false forms of religion without the spirit do not heal or redeem, but aid in destruction, as we have already seen.

There is a certain reconciliation between Balin and Balan at the end, just before their deaths, but it is like the reconciliation that comes between Arthur and the Queen--it comes too late. There can only be hope, after all that has been done, in looking forward to "that purer life" ("Guinevere" 648).

The story of Pelleas and Ettarre also illustrates the extent and nature of the corruption within the kingdom, and its effect upon individuals. Ettarre is not one of those whose mind and passions are poisoned by the Queen's sin--she has poison enough of her own--but she is nonetheless another example of the destructive side of woman's nature. Like Vivien, she is proud, beautiful, sensual, and thirsty for worldly glory and power. She lives by the principle of hate, like Vivien, and uses hate as a means to destroy what or whom she dislikes; for, just as love unifies and heals, hate divides and wounds.

Ettarre's lover, Pelleas, is in many respects Balin and Balan bound together in one person. In fact, the story of Pelleas is parallel, in many respects, to the story we have just discussed.





At the beginning of the Idyll, Pelleas appears to be an example of a successful combination of the attributes represented by Balin and Balan. He possesses passions, but his passions are exalted and refined by noble ideals (inspired, as in the case of Balin, by his lofty concept of the King and Queen), by reason, and by his love for a beautiful woman, Ettarre. He is also very naïve and inexperienced, however, and has not yet learned that outward beauty is not necessarily an indication of spiritual beauty or beauty of the mind. When he first meets Ettarre, therefore,

The beauty of her flesh abash'd the boy,  
As tho' it were the beauty of her soul;  
For as the base man, judging of the good,  
Puts his own baseness in him by default  
Of will and nature, so did Pelleas lend  
All the young beauty of his own soul to hers,  
Believing her, and when she spake to him  
Stammer'd and could not make her a reply.  
("Pelleas and Ettarre" 74-81)

Thus enthralled by her deceitful perfection, he subjects himself, time after time, to her cruelty and the brutality of her men. In exchange for love, Ettarre gives him hate, and in exchange for honour, scorn. She thrusts him brutally out of her presence each time he comes to plead for her favour; but he has become a slave to her beauty, and so continues to return. As Tennyson says,

Then when he came before Ettarre, the sight  
Of her rich beauty made him at one glance  
More bondsman in his heart than in his bonds.  
(229-31)

Ettarre cannot bear his presence because it is a constant rebuke to her own conscience; for she knows that she is corrupted and unworthy of the love of any good man. When she sees that



Pelleas has returned to her a second time, she says to her men, "Ye know yourselves; how can ye bide at peace,/ Affronted with his fulsome innocence?" (257-58) As in the case of Lancelot and Guinevere, guilt is miserable in the presence of innocence; and thus Pelleas is thrust out of doors a second time. Only he declares, before he leaves, that he will trouble her no longer, for he feels that his visits have marred her beauty with spite. Her worldliness being somewhat penetrated by the honesty and sincerity of the young knight, Ettarre begins to ponder her own state more seriously, as Ida does in The Princess, and the seeds of repentance, though still dormant, are planted in her soul.

Pelleas next makes the mistake of trusting Gawain, whom he meets on the way. Gawain takes advantage of Pelleas' distress to make his way into the bed-chamber of Ettarre. Under the pretense of helping Pelleas to discover Ettarre's true feelings, Gawain makes his way, by trickery, into her castle. For three long days, Pelleas waits for an answer from his false friend until, "lost in a doubt" (383), he wanders to the castle to see what is the matter. On the way, his mind is troubled, significantly, by the memory of a song about a "worm within the rose" (390 ff), but he knows not why it troubles him until he reaches the castle garden and finds Gawain and Ettarre sleeping together in a tent surrounded by roses, which are reminiscent of the rose-garden in "Balin and Balan", and convey the same impressions of sensuality and latent corruption. At the sight of Gawain and Ettarre sleeping together, Pelleas is more than a little



disconcerted, and "Back, as a hand that pushes thro' the leaf/ To find a nest and feels a snake, he drew" (428-29). Being at last truly bitten by the "worm within the rose", he becomes totally disillusioned, embittered and confused. Like Balin, he does not know how to cope with moral corruption when he finally sees it for what it is; nor does he know how to cope with his own disillusionment, for he has placed all of his faith in human nature and has nothing higher to turn to. Torn between his inbred fear of sin, and the impulse to kill the sleeping lovers where they lie, he vacillates for a time, but finally decides to lay his sword across their necks as a warning. When he has done this, he leaves them and, like Balin and Percivale, begins to rant and rail against almost everything and everyone. He concludes with the assertion: "I loathe her, as I loved her to my shame./ I never loved her, but I lusted for her" (474-75). Not willing to condemn only Ettarre, he wrongfully condemns that which was highest and purest in himself--his love--by calling it lust. It is true that he was attracted to the physical perfection of Ettarre, but he was not lustful, for his love redeems Ettarre, and lust has no redemptive power; he was only deceived, as he continues to be. Like Balin, he dashes "the rowel into his horse" (476) and dashes away into the night on a wild and meaningless quest of his own, having lost the guidance of his nobler self and his ideals. Instead of attempting to curb the corruption he sees, he loses all control and becomes corrupt, by abandoning himself to his baser passions. Hissing defiance, like a serpent, at Lancelot and Guinevere (590), he becomes a spreader of the poison of scandal.





The "worm within the rose" claims another victim from among the weak in faith.

In the meantime, however, Ettarre repents of her wickedness:

And he that tells the tale  
Says that her ever-veering fancy turn'd  
To Pelleas, as the one true knight on earth,  
And only lover; and thro' her love her life  
Wasted and pined, desiring him in vain.  
(482-86)

Her repentance, like that of Balin, Balan, Lancelot and Guinevere, comes too late for the fulfilment that might have been.

In "Merlin and Vivien", we find that even the once-wise Merlin is not able to remain untainted by the poison of the "worm within the rose." Disheartened by the state of things in Camelot, he yields, as Tennyson himself might have been tempted to yield, to despair:

Then fell on Merlin a great melancholy;  
He walked with dreams and darkness, and he found  
A doom that ever poised itself to fall,  
An ever-moaning battle in the mist,  
World-war of dying flesh against the life,  
Death in all life and lying all in love,  
The meanest having power upon the highest,  
And the high purpose broken by the worm.  
("Merlin and Vivien" 187-94

Underlining mine)

Clyde de L. Ryals, in his book of essays entitled From the Great Deep, suggests that Merlin is the "man of intellect in the modern world."<sup>3</sup> For, he reasons logically against the arguments of the wily Vivien, but his logic and powers of reasoning do not save him from falling into Vivien's trap. Like Lucretius in the poem of that name, he finds the intellect alone to be powerless in the face of the overwhelming weariness of life and the temptations of the flesh. In



spite of his apparent wisdom, he cannot help being attracted to the young Vivien, and he is obviously flattered that he should be the object of the attention of one so young and beautiful. If the charm which Vivien so patiently wrests from Merlin represents, as de L. Ryals suggests, "erotic passion", or "the willingness to surrender the will to desire,"<sup>4</sup> then it becomes clear that Vivien's appeal is totally sexual. Thus, when the old seer, weary of the perplexities, paradoxes, and reversals of life, and secretly desiring to escape into a lotus-land of youthful eroticism, yields his secret to Vivien, he really yields himself to her sexually. He becomes a slave to her will, as Pelleas becomes a slave to the will of Ettarre, because, in his innermost being, he wants to be her slave; and it is not out of senility or weariness alone that he yields. Like many of the knights and like the Queen herself, he abandons Arthur's cause and yields himself up to the will of the flesh.

If Tennyson's The Princess is an assertion of the power of woman to bring fulfilment to men, the Idylls are a declaration of the power of woman to defeat man's quest for wholeness (although, in all of the cases we have examined, the men have at least partially defeated their own purposes). We have seen that even the most pious woman in the Idylls--the sister of Percivale--has a destructive influence upon Arthur's Order, because she takes the leadership of the knights into her own hands, and persuades them to forsake their duties. At the opposite extreme, of course, is Vivien, the female sensualist and temptress, who capitalizes upon the weaknesses and mistakes of others in order to further her own wicked



designs. Percivale's sister at least thinks she is doing right in inspiring the knights to undertake their fruitless quests for the Grail. She is simply deluded. In the case of Vivien, however, every act is done with malicious intent and great cunning. Even when she appears to be friendly and benevolent, her smile is only a mask to hide her evil intent. Vivien is, in effect, a baser version of Guinevere. She is the lesser side of Guinevere carried to its ultimate extreme. And Ettarre is little more than a carbon copy of Vivien.

There are some truly good women in the Idylls, such as Elaine and Enid, but these women seem to be relatively ineffectual, in comparison to those who wield an evil influence. The power of innocence in the works of Tennyson; contrary to what Mr. Van Dyke says in his Poetry of Tennyson,<sup>5</sup> is weak in comparison to the destructive side of man and of woman. All that Elaine is able to do towards righting the wrongs of the kingdom is to die; and this does not solve anyone's problems but her own. Enid, on the other hand, does a considerable amount of good for those closest to her, but her influence upon the kingdom as a whole is not particularly great or lasting. Nor do any of the other more righteous women in the kingdom have any significant influence in sustaining Arthur's Order. They help a few to achieve happiness and wholeness, but their influence is felt only within a limited sphere.

In the Idylls, Tennyson seems to be pointing to four main truths: First, it is easier to do evil, usually, than to do good; to destroy than to save or to build up. Second, the power of





woman to destroy is as great as her power to save, if not greater; third, that man's greatest enemies are not external, but within himself, and he can only be truly destroyed when his inner universe is thrown into confusion. And last, the higher one's place in society or in the world, the greater one's power either for good or for evil. The woman who might have wielded a great and lasting influence for good, as Arthur recognizes, is the Queen; but she chooses the path of least resistance, along with Lancelot, who might also have done much more good than he does, and fails.

The destruction of Arthur's plan, by the end of the Idylls, seems complete and irrevocable. Near the end, before the last great battle, we are made aware that it is autumn; that the seasons have come full circle, along with Arthur's kingdom. The dead leaves are falling, as the last leaves fall from the flower of Arthur's dream of a "whole" society:

That night came Arthur home, and while he climb'd,  
All in a death-dumb autumn-dripping gloom,  
The stairway to the hall, and look'd and saw  
The great Queen's bower was dark,—about his feet  
A voice clung sobbing till he question'd it,  
'Who art thou?' and the voice about his feet  
Sent up an answer, sobbing, 'I am thy fool,  
And I shall never make thee smile again.'

("The Last Tournament" 749-756)

Once again the fool is right. For as the autumn mist clings "to the dead earth, and the land [is] still" ("Guinevere" 8), Arthur's dream also lies dead, because of the "worm" within the rose he chose in the beginning. He had once thought that, were he joined with her, he would have "power on this dead world to make it live" ("The



Coming of Arthur" 93). But the kind of union he once dreamt of  
never comes, in the Idylls. The kingdom of Arthur is still-born,  
or dies in infancy.



## CHAPTER II

### HONOUR IN DISHONOUR; PERFECTION IN IMPERFECTION

In the preceding chapter, we saw the emergence of a pattern tending almost entirely toward dissipation and dissolution, rather than toward wholeness. There is an earnest striving toward wholeness and perfection in the Idylls, but the prominent pattern which emerges, against the current of this striving, is one of spreading corruption, beginning, ironically, at Arthur's Court, the place of perfection. Many of the characters strive upward, and a number of them seem to reach a higher state by the end of the Idylls, yet, because of the poison of adultery and unfaithfulness, their progress is more downward than upward. Lancelot is the first to be poisoned by the "worm within the rose"--if not the Queen herself--and from him it spreads to other individuals such as Elaine, and eventually even to Arthur. Arthur is probably the last to feel the impact of the corruption within his kingdom, but he does feel the full force near the end of his reign. In the meantime, however, others feel the poison and are either corrupted or destroyed by it. Some, such as Pelleas and Balin, begin idealistically but are unable to cope with life once their dream has been shattered by harsh experience. Others who are more wise, such as Edyrn and Arthur's fool--two of the very few characters who do attain to any real wholeness in the Idylls--maintain their integrity in the face of





evil. They have met with evil before, and have even been a part of it, so they know how to meet it again on their own terms, without being corrupted or adding to the evil, as Pelleas does. Most, however, follow "wandering fires,/ Lost in the quagmire" ("The Holy Grail" 319-20), because they are governed either by impulse and passion or by illusion, rather than by the divine wisdom which Arthur represents.

Although Arthur is representative of divine, or at least spiritual, wisdom, he is nevertheless a man, and is subject to the ambivalent and paradoxical nature of life. The statement which we quoted in the previous chapter, in relation to Lancelot, might well apply, in an oblique way, to Arthur:

His honour rooted in dishonour stood,  
And faith unfaithful made him falsely true.  
("Lancelot and Elaine" 871-72)

Arthur is the epitome of perfection, yet is imperfect; he is the one "faultless" being in the kingdom, yet is strangely incomplete, and is responsible, in part, for the downfall of his own kingdom. Therefore he is a part of a paradox which is central to much of the poetry of Tennyson--the paradox of honour in dishonour and perfection in imperfection. Since Arthur is, in many respects, the apex of Tennyson's vision of the ideal manhood, and is symbolically connected with other important figures in other poems, we will use him and his dilemma as a lens through which other situations and characters--particularly those in The Princess--will be examined in this chapter. We will attempt to show that a second basic pattern, closely associated with that traced in Chapter I, emerges when one



studies Arthur's dilemma in relation to The Princess and various shorter works of Tennyson. And that pattern, like the first, is intimately involved with the quest for wholeness and perfection.

Although Arthur in the Idylls is something of a Christ-figure--and the numerous Biblical echoes in the poem bear witness to this fact--he is not altogether Christ-like. He possesses the lofty nobility and purity which Christ always exemplified, but he lacks the humanity of Christ, in spite of his flesh. In fact, we may question whether Arthur ever does really take on flesh in any humanistic sense. Tennyson himself said of Arthur and the Idylls: "By Arthur I always meant the soul and by the [knights of] the Round Table the passions and capacities of a man."<sup>1</sup> And again: "My meaning in the Idylls of the King was spiritual. . . Arthur was allegorical to me. I intended to represent him as the ideal of the soul of man coming into contact with the warring elements of the flesh."<sup>2</sup> In the light of these statements, and in the light of the poem itself, Arthur can be seen as the soul warring against the flesh. But the significant point here is that, from a literal point of view, he never wars against his own flesh. He seems to be of flesh and blood, particularly in "Morte d'Arthur", yet he is never at war with himself in the sense that Christ must have been at war with himself. Christ suffered temptation for forty days in the wilderness, and we would be naïve to assume that He did not feel the weight of these temptations. He was the divine Son of God, but He was also Jesus, the earthly son of Mary. He yielded to no temptations, but he must have felt the force of them. The book of Hebrews tells us that "in that he himself hath



suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted." (Hebrews 2:18). In order to be tempted and to understand the temptations of others, one must possess the weaknesses of flesh. Arthur, on the other hand, is seemingly a being of flesh, but has none of the weaknesses of flesh. From an allegorical point of view he does, but we are dealing with Arthur here as a separate entity. He is always secure and sublime in his complete mastery of self. He comes close to a physical death in the final Idyll, but during the course of his rather mysterious life, he never suffers the agony of temptation or any severe conflict between sense and soul. The agonizing conflict which rages continually between the flesh and spirit of Lancelot, and marks his face with deep lines, is never seen in any degree in Arthur. All of his battles are external, and for this reason Arthur could be considered to be a less interesting and less colourful character than Lancelot or even Guinevere. For this reason also, Lancelot is more attractive to Guinevere than is Arthur. She says to her illicit lover, at one point: "He is all fault who hath no fault at all./ For who loves me must have a touch of earth;/ The low sun makes the colour" ("Lancelot and Elaine" 132-34).

One need not assume from this confession on the part of the Queen that she is a lover of low or base men. Lancelot, though definitely a sinner, is not base. The low sun makes the sunset, but the sun at a low angle with respect to the horizon is still the same sun that blazed high in the heavens at mid-day. The only difference is that the sun at the close of day seems to stoop closer to the earth, and in so doing its blazing celestial light becomes softened





and subdued, so that its glory, which is perhaps increased rather than decreased, can be viewed with pleasure rather than discomfort or pain. Its beauty then inspires and pleases, when looked upon directly, whereas it would have blinded anyone who looked squarely upon its glory earlier in the day, unless a screen of clouds happened to intervene.

In this image of the "low sun" as opposed to the high sun, lies the key to one of the central problems involved in Arthur's attempt to achieve unity between himself and his Queen, and himself and his knights. Arthur is always the high sun blazing with unsubdued brilliance high in the heavens, though apparently with a cold brilliance, except on the battle field. He lacks the capacity to stoop low enough to the earth so that his perfection can be understood by the simple as well as the wise; by the many as well as the few. There are a few noble souls in the Idylls who see Arthur and his ideal for what they are; who possess the nobility of mind and strength of character and vision to reach up to Arthur's level. But these few are able to grasp the fire of the high sun because they are already high enough to reach up and grasp it, like Prometheus, from Heaven, and not because of Arthur's stooping to them. Unlike Arthur, Christ stooped to the weak and the weakest, and lifted them up closer to his level. He was above them all, and could have remained aloof and secure in his own righteousness and superiority, like the Soul in "The Palace of Art"; but his wisdom and superior nature would not allow Him to do so. Instead, he continually pointed to the light upon the mountain--the mountain which one must climb in order to



become a whole and perfect being--while He himself was usually down in the valley and the lowlands, helping the weak, the crippled and the maimed to struggle upward to the summit. He might well have stood high upon the mountain--as Arthur does, in effect, though his intentions are good--and beckoned the multitude below to come up to where He was; but few would have been the clear-sighted and valiant souls who would have had the strength and endurance to climb the steeps unaided. This is precisely the problem with Arthur, as Guinevere unconsciously implies in her confession after seeing Arthur for the last time:

Ah, great and gentle lord,  
 Who wast, as is the conscience of a saint  
 Among his warring senses, to thy knights--  
 To whom my false voluptuous pride, that took  
 Full easily all impressions from below,  
 Would not look up, or half-despised the height  
 To which I would not or I could not climb--  
 I thought I could not breathe in that fine air,  
 That pure severity of perfect light--  
("Guinevere" 633-41)

Although the Queen rightly condemns herself for not attempting to climb to Arthur's height, she is not altogether to blame, for the reasons already suggested. If Guinevere is guilty of worldly pride, perhaps Arthur is guilty of pride of a different kind--a pride in his own righteousness which prevents him from stooping to the weak or fully sympathizing with them in their struggles with the flesh.

To put the problem another way, Arthur possesses a special divine genius in battle, where the battle is hot and earnest and the enemy is unmistakable; but he lacks the ability to perceive the more subtle enemies which steal into his kingdom to disrupt order and



stir up confusion; which steal away the hearts of his own Queen and his best knight, and eventually steal away the hearts of many, bringing about the destruction of Arthur's Order. In some ways, Arthur is as naïve and unseeing as a little child--unseeing in a worldly sense, that is. It seems that everyone in the kingdom is aware of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere long before Arthur is. Undoubtedly he hears many rumours, but his very nobility of mind and his refusal to think evil of others prevent him from taking the necessary steps which might have saved his Order. Had the "affair" been thwarted before it became common knowledge, it might not have become the cause of spreading corruption within the kingdom. But Arthur, strangely enough, never shows any signs of being suspicious of his Queen and his "right arm", Lancelot, until the corruption has become widespread, both within the lovers themselves and within the kingdom as a whole. The first evidence of suspicion on Arthur's part occurs in "Lancelot and Elaine", when both Lancelot and the Queen excuse themselves, on rather feeble grounds, from attending the tournament (78 ff). When both the Queen and Lancelot refuse to go--an unusual decision for both--the king does finally begin to admit a faint shadow of suspicion through the almost impenetrable armour of his brain (95). He looks first at one, then at the other, and then leaves them without saying a word. In short, he begins to "see the darkness". Up to this time he has been too dazzled by the light of his own dreams of glory to see the shadows which have slowly and surely been creeping upon him.

The above discussion raises doubts in our minds as to whether





Arthur is indeed a "faultless" being in any sense. This is a question which others have pursued,<sup>3</sup> but I propose to pursue it a little further here, since it is relevant to the idea of wholeness. The fact is, it is impossible to say either that Arthur is perfect or imperfect without qualifying what we mean by perfection, for he is both perfect and imperfect. He is indeed perfect in the sense that he commits no crime or sin, always makes the right decision--though some of his decisions come too late--and treats no man or woman unjustly. But do these qualifications in themselves make him a complete and perfect being in every way? The answer to this is a resounding "No", or Arthur would probably not have lost the loyalty of his Queen, who is essentially a lovable and gracious person, as the nuns in the convent recognize ("Guinevere" 687-692). That she does wrong is not to be denied; the extent of her influence for evil in the Idylls is considerable, as Chapter I attempted to illustrate. But to assume that Arthur's Order fails solely because of the weakness of his Queen and his knights is simple-minded and erroneous. It is extremely unlikely that Tennyson pictured Arthur as being perfect and complete as he appears in the Idylls. If he had meant Arthur to be complete in himself, he would not have stressed so carefully the union between Arthur and Guinevere in "The Coming of Arthur", wherein he writes:

And Arthur, passing thence to battle, felt  
 Travail, and throes and agonies of life,  
 Desiring to be joined with Guinevere,  
 And thinking as he rode: 'Her father said  
 That there between the man and beast they die.  
 Shall I not lift her from this land of beasts  
 Up to my throne and side by side with me?



What happiness to reign a lonely king,  
 Vext-- O ye stars that shudder over me,  
 O earth that soundest hollow under me,  
Vext with waste dreams? for saving I be join'd  
 To her that is the fairest under heaven,  
 I seem as nothing in the mighty world,  
 And cannot will my will not work my work  
Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm  
 Victor and lord. ("The Coming of Arthur" 74-89  
 Underlining mine)

This is a vitally significant passage, both for its literal meaning and for the overtones which echo through others of Tennyson's works, particularly The Princess. The passage which immediately follows the one just quoted is also important. We will quote them both here and discuss them more fully as they become applicable:

But were I joined with her,  
 Then might we live together as one life,  
 And reigning with one will in everything  
 Have power on this dark land to lighten it,  
 And power on this dead world to make it live.'  
 (89-93 Underlining mine)

If Arthur represents, as Tennyson says, the soul of man coming "into contact with the warring elements of the flesh," it becomes rather difficult to ascertain what Guinevere may have represented in the poet's mind. Certainly she is not a spiritual being; she is very much flesh-and-blood. But does this mean that she is a part of "the warring elements of the flesh"? Perhaps the answer to our question lies in the passages we have just quoted. As Arthur goes into battle against the lords who oppose his ascent to the throne, he suffers "Travail, and throes and agonies of life" (74). The words used here, significantly, are those which are usually used in connection with a woman in childbirth. In this instance, however, the situation is changed somewhat; for the throes and travail seem to



be the pains of being born, not of giving birth. Since Arthur's origin in the Idylls cannot be traced conclusively to any earthly parents, we are led to suppose that he was not born into the world in the usual way at all, but was placed in the world by divine hands. Arthur's real birth into flesh does not occur, therefore, until his union with Guinevere. The "soul" then becomes or takes on flesh, with all of its potential for good and evil. Up to this time, Arthur has no difficulty in subduing his foes, for his spiritual force has been unencumbered by flesh; but when he unites himself with Guinevere he takes upon himself the weakness as well as the added potential strength of flesh. Arthur's failure, as we have already pointed out, lies in his inability to comprehend the extent of the weaknesses and dangers of the flesh with which he has become involved. He seems to think that because, to him, "Man's word is God in man" ("The Coming of Arthur" 132), it is therefore the ruling force in all those who belong to his court; or to carry the allegory further, he does not seem to comprehend that flesh does not always obey the soul, but can become a law unto itself.

In the light of the interpretation I have just put forward, it becomes evident that Arthur fails, from an allegorical point of view, because of his inability to achieve a satisfactory union between himself (the soul) and the passions and capacities of his own flesh (Guinevere and the Knights). He is able to subdue the outward forces without difficulty; but when he is confronted with the age-old human difficulty of subduing the enemies within the flesh, he is successful only for a short time. Tennyson seems to imply, by Arthur's





predicament, that a perfect union between flesh and soul can never be achieved while human nature remains as it is. He also seems to suggest that flesh is stronger than soul. The flesh is always at war with the soul, but the soul is sometimes too noble or too innocent to realize it is being attacked by subtle forces until it is almost too late. Such is the case, I believe, with Arthur. Arthur realizes, however, that unless he establishes a satisfactory union between himself and the flesh (or between himself and Guinevere), his spiritual perfection will become stagnant and barren, like a hollow waste land. It will become, in other words, like the perfection of the Soul in "The Palace of Art". In the passage previously quoted, Arthur says:

What happiness to reign a lonely king,  
 Vext-- O ye stars that shudder over me,  
 O earth that soundest hollow under me,  
 Vext with waste dreams? (81-84)

Thus, at the beginning of the Idylls Arthur is caught between two awesome alternatives: either he can remain a lone spiritual being and become sterile and unfulfilled through a lack of meaningful interaction with human beings, or he can take on flesh, as it were, and become subject to the failures and perplexities of a paradoxical nature. Though he chooses to associate himself with flesh, however, his choice does not save him from the hollowness of the waste land or from being "Vext with waste dreams." Rather, the spiritual waste land which, even at the best of times, is lurking somewhere in the background, becomes more and more a part of the foreground until, at the end of the Idylls, the very court of Arthur is wasted and ruined, as we observed in Chapter I.



In assuming an allegorical point of view in our interpretation of the Idylls, we have temporarily lost sight of the significance of the more literal interpretation. To assume that Tennyson meant for us to interpret the Idylls only allegorically is undoubtedly erroneous. Tennyson protested against carrying the allegorical point of view too far;<sup>4</sup> for, although he deliberately wove an allegorical thread through the fabric of the poem, it would be disastrous to the effectiveness of the poem to try to attach a symbolic or allegorical significance to every event, character, and detail. As Tennyson well knew, the full richness of the poem cannot be appreciated unless we can view the conflicts involved in the poem as struggles for harmony and wholeness on various levels of human experience. However, our rather brief discussion of the relationship between Arthur, Guinevere, and the knights, has perhaps shed some further light on the need for a union between man's soul and his passions--and we will be returning to this theme again. In the meantime, if we set the allegory aside, Arthur's yearnings for union with the Queen take on another more obvious significance. That is, Arthur's union with Guinevere, or his attempted union, is not only the union of a divine spiritual entity with the weak flesh represented by Guinevere. It is also the attempted union between a real man and a real woman--not only a sexual union, although this is involved, but a union of two minds, two souls, two wills. To recall the words of Arthur:

But were I joined with her,  
Then might we live together as one life,  
And reigning with one will in everything,  
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,  
And power on this dead world to make it live.

("The Coming of Arthur" 89-93)





What we have here is a statement of what might be possible, on the one level, if the soul were able to achieve complete mastery over the flesh; and on a more literal level, a statement of the infinite potential for growth and goodness which might be made possible through a complete union of two souls working according to harmonious and idealistic principles. We are speaking here in particular of a uniting of male and female, since this kind of a union is especially significant, and is essential, in Tennyson's view, to the making of a complete man. We have already pointed out Arthur's failure to achieve a satisfactory union with his Queen; but for the time being, let us turn to a passage in The Princess that is somewhat parallel to those we have been discussing, and which may give us some further insight into the necessity and meaning of the union of opposites.

In Part Seventh of The Princess, the Prince attempts to break down the icy independence of Princess Ida, who has refused his love in favour of her quest for fame and knowledge, by arguing thus:

For woman is not undevelop't man,  
 But diverse. Could we make her as the man,  
Sweet love were slain; his dearest bond is this,  
Not like to like, but like in difference.  
 Yet in the long years liker must they grow;  
 The man be more of woman, she of man;  
 He gain in sweetness and in moral height,  
 Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw the world;  
 She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care,  
 Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind;  
 Till at the last she set herself to man,  
Like perfect music unto noble words;  
 And so these twain, upon the skirts of Time,  
 Sit side by side, full-summ'd in all their powers,  
 Dispensing harvest, sowing the to-be,  
 Self-reverent each and reverencing each,  
 Distinct in individualities,  
 But like each other even as those who love.  
Then comes the statelier Eden back to men. . . .

(259-277 Underlining mine)





He also urges her to let

' . . .this proud watchword rest  
Of equal; seeing either sex alone  
Is half itself, and in true marriage lies  
Nor equal, nor unequal. Each fulfils  
Defect in each, and always thought in thought,  
Purpose in purpose, will in will, they grow,  
The single pure and perfect animal,  
The two-cell'd heart beating, with one full stroke,  
Life.' (282-90 Underlining mine)

There are overtones in these passages which link them with the Idylls and with others of Tennyson's works. The line "Not like to like, but like in difference" echoes the passage in In Memoriam in which Tennyson explains why Hallam meant more to him than his own brothers:

'More than my brothers are to me,'--  
Let not this vex thee, noble heart!  
I know thee of what force thou art  
To hold the costliest love in fee.

But thou and I are one in kind,  
As moulded like in Nature's mint;  
And hill and wood and field did print  
The same sweet forms in either mind.

For us the same cold streamlet curl'd  
Thro' all his eddy coves, the same  
All winds that roam the twilight came  
In whispers of the beauteous world.

At one dear knee we proffer'd vows,  
One lesson from one book we learned,  
Ere childhood's flaxen ringlet turn'd  
To black and brown on kindred brows.

And so my wealth resembles thine,  
But he was rich where I was poor,  
And he supplied my want the more  
As his unlikeness fitted mine. (LXXIX)

I include this passage here because it underlines the importance of the union of diverse and opposite qualities in the quest for wholeness. It carries into the relationship between man and man the same basic



principles put forward in The Princess. Moreover, Tennyson views himself consistently, in In Memoriam, as a widow, and speaks of his spirit as having been married to the spirit of Hallam (XCVII). This is a fitting analogy; for, if what we read of Hallam is correct, he possessed aggressiveness and a masculine firmness of mind which Tennyson evidently lacked. Moreover, the poetic side of man's nature is sometimes regarded as feminine and recessive rather than masculine and aggressive. Thus the unlikenesses of the two men blended together around a basic core of manliness, each man making the other more complete. This would explain why Tennyson felt such a heavy weight of loss at the death of Hallam, and why he refers to himself, in the elegy, as a widow; for the two souls were joined together in an ideal union akin to the ideal union of man and wife described in the Idylls and The Princess. In making this statement, I do not imply a sexual relationship between the two men; for such a relationship would undoubtedly have destroyed any higher kind of union that existed between them.

The key to a satisfactory union--or one of the keys--lies in the phrase, "Not like to like, but like in difference." There must be a "still point", to use a phrase from Eliot, at which two minds can converge and encircle each other in a harmonious pattern--and this is where Arthur and Guinevere fail, for they have no common point at which to meet. But there must also be individual gyrations moving continually outward from this point, like the circles moving outward from two stones cast together in a still pond. If the two sets of circles cease to move outward into new areas, they become static and



dead, just as the souls of a man and his wife become dead and static when they cease to expand, independently and yet together and dependently. The mental and spiritual circles of each must intertwine and interact continually as they move outward. The wife must move slowly but steadily into realms of thought and intellectual endeavour that lie beyond the usual routines of wifedom and motherhood. Her mind must take on masculine expansiveness while retaining the peculiar gentleness of womanhood. The husband, on the other hand, must take into his inner being something of the woman's sweetness and gentleness without sacrificing his basic masculinity or the "thaws that throw the world".

All of this, however, requires a delicate balance between masculinity and femininity, between the soul and the passions, and between the head and the heart. If the woman loses her basic femininity and gentleness, and seeks to develop only masculine aggressiveness and intellectual prowess, she becomes an unbalanced and incomplete person. She becomes, in other words, like Princess Ida in The Princess, who seeks to make herself superior to men by casting off her womanhood--or by attempting to do so, at least. She merely succeeds, however, in making herself something less than either man or woman. In attempting to negate her femininity, she goes against the very laws of Nature and becomes, in effect, an unnatural being. She cannot be a man, because she is at enmity with the ideals of the world of men, or with their lack of ideals. Neither can she be a woman, because women are by nature somewhat dependent upon men for their happiness and protection. She therefore attempts to become





a being which, as I suggested, is neither man nor woman. She becomes a cold and insulated intellect, possessing none of the tender feelings of womanhood, before her pride is broken, and none of the passions and few of the "capacities of a man." It is no accident that she is referred to as the "Head", meaning, on the literal level, the head of the university for women, and on a symbolic level, the head without the heart. It is not until the young child of Psyche begins to draw out of her the womanly feelings which have long been asleep, or perhaps have never before awakened, that she begins to become a more whole and complete woman; begins to bridge the gap between the head and the heart. The union between head and heart does not come about suddenly, however. The child is the catalyst which begins the process toward inner wholeness; but there are other factors which bring the process to completion.

The Princess wages war in defense of her university, and the masculine, more violent side of her nature, represented in the battle-scene by her brother, is victor; but, ironically, she has already begun to be conquered by the feminine side of her nature. She views the violence she has inflicted upon the prince and his men, and her compassion begins to awaken, little by little. "Her iron will [is] broken in her mind" (Part Sixth 102); and in a mood of dejection mingled with pity, she offers her university to be used as a hospital. Like Arthur in the Idylls, she fears that her cause has been frustrated forever, and that all her labours have been in vain. Lost in a cloud of disillusionment, she becomes ashamed of her womanly softness for a time:



But sadness on the soul of Ida fell,  
 And hatred of her weakness, blent with shame.  
 Old studies failed; seldom she spoke; but oft  
 Clomb to the roofs, and gazed alone for hours.  
 On that disastrous leaguer, swarms of men,  
 Darkening her female field. Void was her use,  
 And she as one that climbs a peak to gaze  
 O'er land and main, and sees a great black cloud  
 Drag inwards from the deeps, a wall of night,  
 Blot out the slope of sea from verge to shore,  
 And suck the blinding splendour from the sand,  
 And quenching lake by lake and tarn by tarn  
 Expunge the world; so fared she gazing there,  
 So blacken'd all her world in secret, blank  
And waste it seem'd and vain; till down she came  
And found fair peace once more among the sick.  
 (Part Seventh 14-29 Underlining mine)

As we examine this passage--one of the most central in the poem--a pattern begins to emerge which can be traced through the Idylls, in the light of what we have said earlier in this chapter, and also through a number of the shorter poems. In the Idylls, we have seen that, though Arthur attempts to descend, like Ida, to find "fair peace among the sick," or among those who are not whole, he finds peace only for a relatively short time, because he never achieves complete and lasting wholeness within himself. In the last book of the Idylls, he departs for the valley of Avilion to heal himself of his "grievous wound" (432), which is more than physical in a man who "shall not die." And because he fails to achieve wholeness himself, he is unsuccessful in satisfying the needs of others. Thus Arthur's dilemma is clear. It is partly because he never really descends from his tower and becomes sufficiently human, that his union with Guinevere is incomplete; and because this union is incomplete or unsatisfactory, the greater union between Arthur and his kingdom does not prevail.



Guinevere also fits into this pattern, though in a different way. She is a high-born woman who poses, for a considerable length of time, as something more than she is. She poses as a Queen among women, an example for all to behold; yet she is secretly of the camp of Mark and Vivien, whether she realizes it or not. As long as she so continues, her life is divided and unwholesome; and it is not until she descends from her pretentious tower of pride and selfishness, and humbles herself among the nuns, that she finds "fair peace"--though it is an imperfect peace haunted by the shadows of the past; it is not fulfilment but relief, and this is often all that can be hoped for.

The pattern we have been discussing is characterized, in many poems, by the image of a beautiful, lonely maiden locked away in a high tower. This is an image that is absolutely central to Tennyson--one with which he seems to have been almost obsessed. An essay has been published on the "high-born maiden motif" in Tennyson,<sup>5</sup> but it is my design to examine the motif, and its correlative involving the high-born man, from the perspective we have already established.

Princess Ida and Guinevere are akin to the Soul in "The Palace of Art". In that poem, the Soul, which is significantly in the form of a beautiful woman, builds herself a great palace high upon a cliff overlooking the sea. She furnishes the palace with everything that can delight her in the way of beauty and art, and then sits back in leisure to enjoy her luxuries in solitude while gazing in scorn, from time to time, upon the common hordes which grovel below her:





'O Godlike isolation which art mine,  
 I can but count thee perfect gain,  
 What time I watch the darkening droves of swine  
 That range on yonder plain.

'In filthy sloughs they roll a prurient skin,  
 They gaze and wallow, breed and sleep;  
 And oft some brainless devil enters in,  
 And drives them to the deep.'

(197-204 Underlining mine)

The swine she views with scorn are not swine but men. Though mankind must wallow in the mud of mundane experience far below, the Soul is seemingly free and secure in her isolated perfection, which is really nothing more than egotistical pride and selfishness. She further says:

I care not what the sects may brawl.  
 I sit as God holding no form of creed,  
 But contemplating all. (209-12)

For three years she prospers, or seems to prosper, in her isolation, but in the fourth she falls, "Struck through with pangs of hell" (220). Her selfish pride which has isolated her from humankind, has gradually eaten away at her spiritual foundation. Even while she has prated of her own moral superiority, she has been guilty of one of the worst kinds of immorality, a kind with which Tennyson was vitally concerned. Her sin consists not only in pride but in selfishly hoarding her wealth and powers, while she might have lifted the so-called swine to a level nearer her own, as Arthur attempts to do in the Idylls. While she sits "as God, contemplating all", thousands are starving spiritually and emotionally. As we suggested earlier, the kind of pride exemplified by the Soul recoils upon itself, like a serpent, and stings its possessor with lethal poison. The Soul in a state of isolation and pride needs no outward force to bring it down into the depths of hell, but falls of its own weight



when its foundations are eaten away by the decay of stagnation.

As almost always, however, Tennyson offers us a ray of hope, however vague and uncertain may seem the basis of that hope. He concludes:

So when four years were wholly finished,  
She threw her royal robes away.  
'Make me a cottage in the vale,' she said,  
'Where I may mourn and pray.

'Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are  
So lightly, beautifully built;  
Perchance I may return with others there  
When I have purged my guilt.' (289-296)

The Soul's salvation lies not so much in returning to orthodox religion--although this could be implied--as in humbling herself in her own eyes, recognizing her faults, and desiring to share her wealth with others. Tennyson has been accused of advocating a return to the "preacher's soap-box," but such an accusation is manifestly unfair in view of the poet's own unorthodoxy. The principles implied at the conclusion of "The Palace of Art" are not dogmatic or sectarian, but are general principles which have valid application in any phase of life; and they apply as much to art as to anything else. In Tennyson's view, a union of art with social concern and social morality is essential. Art and beauty are only of value or significance as they relate to human life; and when they become an end in themselves, their real usefulness is frustrated.

The Princess in the poem of that name is like the Soul in the poem under discussion in that she hides not only her beauty but her potential for self-fulfilment in the tower of her intellectual pride; and in so doing, she denies others their true fulfilment also.



In the early phase of her intellectual reign, her right arm is Psyche, which means, significantly, "the soul." Old Gama, Ida's father, recalls those days and says:

When first she [Psyche] came, all flush'd you said to me,  
 Now had you got a friend of your own age,  
 Now could you share your thought, now should men see  
 Two women faster welded in one love  
Than pairs of wedlock? she you walked with, she  
 You talked with, whole nights long, up in the tower,  
 Of sine and arc, spheroid and azimuth,  
 And right ascension, heaven knows what.

(Part Sixth 233-240 Underlining mine)

There is an intellectual union suggested here between Psyche and the Princess, but it is one that cannot last; for, on a literal level, it is a union of "like to like" and, though good to a point, is unfruitful when carried too far. Moreover, on the mythical or symbolic level, the soul (Psyche) demands a loyalty to more than the intellect alone. When the rift appears between the two women, Ida is left more alone and isolated than ever in her ivory tower, but is still determined to preserve her isolation. Nor does she begin to sense the emptiness of her existence until the child of Psyche begins to melt the coldness of her heart.

The myth of Psyche and Cupid, which is worked into the fabric of the poem, is worth mentioning, because it underlines the central theme. In the myth,<sup>6</sup> Psyche unintentionally incurs the wrath of the goddess Venus because her beauty has drawn away many worshippers from the shrines of Venus' temples. In order to punish Psyche, Venus commands her son Cupid to marry Psyche to an ugly serpentine monster;





but Cupid falls in love with the young goddess before he has a chance to invoke the intended curse. Instead, he employs a zephyr to carry her away to his own castle, where he subsequently speaks loving words to her, though without showing himself. In fact, he warns Psyche that if she looks upon him she will be sorely punished. However, on one night her curiosity overcomes her reason, and she lights a taper and looks upon the sleeping Cupid, who immediately awakens and flees because of Psyche's unfaithfulness. Moreover, her looking upon Cupid incurs a number of punishments and trials from the jealous Venus. After she has suffered these trials successfully, however, and has returned from the last one, she is joined by Love once again, and the Soul and Love live together forever in perfect union. After trials and tribulations, the union could be made complete and lasting.

The basic outlines of this myth can be discerned in The Princess. Psyche incurs the wrath of the Princess, who might correspond to Venus, because of unfaithfulness to a rather foolish and vain ideal. She is therefore separated from her child, and is required to pass through tribulations before she can be permitted to enjoy once again the love of her child. The child is not only the means of reviving her mother's desire for life, but is the symbolic focal-point of a number of unions within the poem. She is the spark which begins to kindle the flame of love within the Princess, and later, though indirectly, within the hearts of the women of her college. It is not in her intellectual tower, but down among the sick, that Ida finally finds peace and love. In other words, it is



among the sick that she is made whole; and love is the primary medication:

From all a closer interest flourish'd up,  
Tenderness touch by touch, and last, to these,  
Love, like an Alpine harebell hung with tears  
By some cold morning glacier; frail at first  
And feeble, all unconscious of itself,  
But such as gather'd color day by day.  
(Part Seventh 98-103)

Under the influence of love,

Her falser self slipt from her like a robe,  
And left her woman, lovelier in her mood  
Than in her mould that other, when she came  
From barren deeps to conquer all with love,  
And down the streaming crystal dropt; and she  
Far-fleeted by the purple island sides,  
Naked, a double light in air and wave,  
To meet her Graces, where they deck'd her out  
For worship without end. . . . (146-154)

The implications in this passage seem to be that Ida becomes, herself, like Psyche; having humbled herself, she is now fit to be exalted. Meanwhile, Florian also rises up "whole" (50), aided by the healing power of Melissa's love:

Nor only these; Love in the sacred halls  
Held carnival at will, and flying struck  
With showers of random sweet on maid and man.  
(69-71)

But let us turn away from this carnival of love for the moment and centre our attention on a few of the shorter poems which fit the pattern we have already discussed in this chapter in relation to the Idylls, "The Palace of Art", and The Princess. It will become more and more evident, as we progress in our discussion, that Tennyson was vitally concerned with paradox as it relates to human life. The characters in many of Tennyson's poems move from one



paradox into another; or rather, the paradox in which we originally find them is reversed. Princess Ida and her miniature in "The Palace of Art" exist in a kind of sickness-in-health situation while isolated in their intellectual towers; yet by descending from their towers and achieving a union with mankind, they attain to a kind of health in sickness. That is, they only become whole by first becoming one of the sick. Variations in this paradoxical pattern can be seen in the Idylls, as we have already partly illustrated, and also in a number of the well-known shorter poems. In "Tithonus", "The Lady of Shalott", and "The May Queen", there is a movement from a death-in-life paradox to a life in death. In "Mariana" there is a yearning toward this kind of a movement, but the persona is mentally and spiritually paralyzed and is somehow compelled to remain dead in life.

In each of the shorter poems mentioned above, the persona is eaten inwardly by a terrible sense of emptiness and stagnation stemming, basically, from his or her utter isolation from others of the human race. In "Mariana" in particular, the sense of deadness and decay is utterly pervasive. Like The Lady of Shalott, she is surrounded by a moat, which is emblematic of her complete isolation from mankind. All of her surroundings are described in terms of corruption and decay:

With blackest moss the flower-plots  
 Were thickly crusted, one and all;  
 The rusted nails fell from the knots  
 That held the pear to the gable-wall.  
 The broken sheds looked sad and strange:  
 Unlifted was the clinking latch;  
 Weeded and worn the ancient thatch





Upon the lonely moated grange. (1-12)

Mariana's impotence and hopelessness are depicted in lines such as these:

From the dark fen the oxen's low  
Came to her; without hope of change,  
In sleep she seem'd to walk forlorn,  
Till cold winds woke the grey-eyed morn  
About the lonely moated grange. (28-32)

The outward decay described in the poem is only the "objective correlative" of Mariana's inward state. The flowers of her womanhood, like the flowers in the flower-plots, are overgrown with "blackest moss." The "dark fen" from which she hears the oxen's low is a reflection of the stagnant fen which her mind and soul have become. Like the Soul in "The Palace of Art", she has become "A spot of dull stagnation, without light / Or power of movement (245-46). She is, in effect, a damned soul, doomed either by her own acts, by the death of loved ones, by the acts of others, or simply by sexual and emotional unfulfilment, to an utterly desolate and sterile death in life. Like Arthur without Guinevere, she is "vext with waste dreams." That her spiritual and emotional starvation is due to an absence of love and companionship is stressed by the ballad-like repetition of Mariana's lamentation:

She only said 'My life is dreary,  
He cometh not,' she said;  
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,  
I would that I were dead!' (45-48)

The death-in-life motif that pervades this poem, as well as "The Lady of Shalott", "Tithonus", and the Idylls, recalls a well-known song from The Princess:



Dear as remember'd kisses after death,  
 And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd  
 On lips that are for others; deep as love,  
 Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;  
 O Death in Life, the days that are no more!

(Part Fourth 36-40)

Like Mariana, Tithonus and the Lady of Shalott prefer death itself to the death in life of unfulfilled love and a life empty of meaning. Tithonus realizes, too late, his mistake in desiring

To vary from the kindly race of men,  
 Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance  
 Where all should pause, as is most meet for all.  
 ("Tithonus" 29-31)

By desiring to be above and beyond mankind, Tithonus has brought upon himself a death in life. He lives in a sphere of existence that is seemingly perfect, yet for him it is imperfection, for he cannot find true fulfilment in it. He has come to realize that, to live forever in an ever-deteriorating body is not to live at all, but to die eternally. He therefore begs the goddess who has made him immortal to make him mortal once again, that he might return to the race "Of happy men that have the power to die" (70). Unlike the Soul in "The Palace of Art", he has no desire to return "with others" to the heavenly courts of immortality, but only to return to others, to the beings that he left behind in order to become imperfectly exalted. Having seen the folly of his youthful desires, he is now content to share the common fate of men, which is to die; for he realizes that even in death there is a certain fulfilment. To be a god is for the gods, and not for men, unless and until they have truly earned such a station and know how to cope with immortality.

Tithonus' death-wish, of course, echoes Mariana's, and the



two personae are akin in some respects. They both have become stagnant and decadent, physically and spiritually. Their progress having ceased long before, they have retrogressed in their isolation from their own kind, and have become dead to anything worthwhile in terms of human values. They are alike, also, in that they both seem to lack the power to die physically. There is a feeling of timelessness in "Mariana" which conveys the distinct impression that her state will continue unchanged for eternity.. Her decadence, in a sense, is perfect decadence, perfect imperfection. Caught between two worlds, she is cut off from the land of the living, yet denied the power to die and be with the dead whose voices she hears in the wind. So it is, essentially, with Tithonus. That which he most desired to avoid, in younger years, is what he most desires to have in old age--the power to die. Though death may hold certain terrors for humankind, it is also a release, an escape from troubles and bondage; and perhaps it is a doorway into a better world. Death in Tennyson is almost always ambivalent. As Gareth discovers, in the Idylls, beneath the awful exterior of death one may find a "blooming boy" ("Gareth and Lynette" 1390).

In "The May Queen", the pattern again comes close to that which we have seen in the Idylls, The Princess, "Tithonus", and "The Palace of Art". The poem is divided into three parts, the last two parts contrasting sharply to the first. Part I is full of the vivaciousness and reckless cheer of a young girl who has been chosen to be Queen of the May. She appears to be simply innocent and fun-loving, but she is nevertheless not without a portion of selfishness





and pride. She describes her rather cruel and thoughtless treatment of her lover, Robin, in these terms:

He thought I was a ghost, mother, for I was all in white,  
And I ran by him without speaking, like a flash of light.  
They call me cruel-hearted, but I care not what they say,  
For I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother,  
I'm to be Queen o' the May.

They say he's dying all for love, but that can never be;  
They say his heart is breaking, mother--what is that to me?  
There's many a bolder lad 'ill woo me any summer day,  
And I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother,  
I'm to be Queen o' the May. (16-25)

In the next section, however, the scene changes from bright sunlight and flowers to the deep shadows of a sick-room; for the May Queen has been stricken with a incurable disease which she knows will soon bring her death. We find, moreover, that a significant change has taken place in the once rather proud and self-centred young lady; for, in spite of her misfortunes, her thoughts are not of herself. She says:

And for myself, indeed, I care not if I go today;  
But, Effie, you must comfort her when I am past away.  
And say to Robin a kind word, and tell him not to fret;  
There's many a worthier than I, would make him happy yet.  
If I had lived--I cannot tell--I might have been his wife;  
But all these things have ceased to be, with my desire  
for life.

(43-48)

Like Mariana, the May Queen loses her desire for life, but not for the same reason. Mariana has already died inwardly, because she has ceased to progress; and her progression has ceased because she has been unable to break the chains of spiritual, emotional, and mental bondage which isolate her from love and from meaningful activity. With the May Queen, the situation is different, however;



for, though she has become the prisoner of her physical disability, she has not ceased to progress; she has not allowed herself to die inwardly. Being forced to turn away from the physical, sensual joys of her active past, she has turned her vision inward long enough to find her true self, and then with new understanding has turned her thoughts outward toward others. She loses herself, in other words, in order to find herself. In her sickness, she becomes perfect in imperfection, whereas in her days of health she was imperfect in her physical perfection. Like the Princess, she finds "fair peace" among the sick, because she is one of the sick. She welcomes death, not as an escape, but as a means whereby her progression may continue.

In "The Lady of Shalott", the pattern of a fall from a false Eden into a real world of meaningful suffering and death again emerges. Like Guinevere and Princess Ida, the Lady of Shalott is a high-born maiden "locked away" in a tower. She is constrained, on penalty of death, to view the world passing by only as it appears in a mirror within the tower. She has heard it said that if she views the outside world directly, a curse will come upon her and she will die. Thus, for a time she is content to sit and watch the people pass by as they are reflected in her mirror; and while she does so, she weaves the images upon a loom. Like the Soul in "The Palace of Art"; however, she eventually becomes "half-sick of shadows" ("The Lady of Shalott" 71) when the emptiness of her existence begins to press in upon her. Her steadily increasing unhappiness reaches a climax when she catches a glimpse of the dashing knight, Lancelot, in her mirror. Casting aside all restraint, like Psyche when she



dared to look upon Love, she looks upon Lancelot directly. And, again like Psyche, she is cursed for this action:

Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror crack'd from side to side;  
'The curse is come upon me,' cried  
The Lady of Shalott. (114-17)

Knowing that her death is near, she writes her name about the prow of a boat, lies down in it, and floats downstream to Camelot, singing as she dies. Like Tithonus, Princess Ida, and King Arthur, she comes to prefer the real though imperfect world of death to the unreal death in life of a seemingly perfect world of shadows. She achieves a greater fulfilment in death than in life, for through death she becomes, for a moment at least, one with her kind. Even as she dies, she is drawn by the current toward her fellow beings, and especially toward Lancelot, who is the main object of her love. Again the theme of fulfilment through union is reiterated; and this includes a union between art and life. Tennyson seems to suggest here as in "The Palace of Art", that art as an abstract entity separate from the basic concerns of real life is empty and vain, like Princess Ida's quest for knowledge.

The emptiness of Princess Ida's world before her "conversion" to love is emphasized throughout The Princess by the Prince's peculiar visionary fits, which are perhaps akin to Tennyson's own mystic trances. On the occasion of the Prince's first meeting with Ida after entering by stealth into her palace, he falls into a visionary trance which he describes thus:

On a sudden my strange seizure came





Upon me, the weird vision of our house.  
 The Princess Ida seem'd a hollow show,  
 Her gay-furr'd cats a painted fantasy,  
 Her college and her maidens empty masks,  
 And I myself the shadow of a dream,  
 For all things were and were not.

(Part Third 167-73)

On the surface it appears that the Prince suffers from hallucinations, and that, in this instance, the reality has given place temporarily to a world of airy fantasy. In actual fact, the opposite is true, however; for the isolated world which the Princess creates for her students and herself is not a realistic world at all; it is a hollow world of airy fantasy which must inevitably perish, like the solitary weavings of the Lady of Shalott. What the Prince sees, then, is not an illusion, but reality; and what "seem'd a hollow show", ironically is exactly that. Significantly, when the Princess finally yields herself up to the power of love, the sense of hollowness gives way to a sense of fulness and faith. The Prince says to Ida:

Lift thine eyes; my doubts are dead,  
 My haunting sense of hollow shows; the change,  
 This truthful change in thee has kill'd it.

(Part Seventh 327-29)

Just before this, however, he appeals to her as to a figure in a dream:

If you be what I think you, some sweet dream,  
 I would but ask you to fulfil yourself;  
 But if you be that Ida whom I knew,  
 I ask you nothing; only, if a dream,  
Sweet dream, be perfect.

(129-34 Underlining mine, here and above)

In answer to this earnest plea, the Princess yields and fully repents of her intellectual coldness. Through love she becomes emotionally whole, a complete woman; and the Prince also becomes whole in more



than a physical sense. By the end of the poem, the Princess is at one with Psyche (the soul), with her own heart, and with the Prince.

Like the Soul in "The Palace of Art", Ida had sought "far less for truth than power in knowledge" (Part Seventh 221), but her falsely noble cause is defeated because

Something wild within her breast,  
And greater than all knowledge, beat her down.  
(Part Seventh 222-3)

The irony of the situation is that, while the Princess wins the battle with the Prince, the latter is the victor, as we earlier suggested; and to carry the irony further, it is through Ida's defeat that she becomes the true victor--not over the Prince, but over the rebel within herself which was preventing her from becoming a whole and complete woman. Like Edyrn in the Idylls, she discovers that one must first descend before one can rise--and this has been the central truth underlying this entire chapter. Love and Nature blend together to form a two-edged sword that lifts the Princess up even while it beats her down. Love, like Hamlet, is sometimes "cruel only to be kind" (Hamlet III, iv, 178). In losing herself and her essentially selfish cause for others, Ida finds herself. She becomes, in other words, "perfect", but not in the sense of having no faults. She becomes perfect in the sense of being complete and whole, rather than fragmentary and divided. She becomes another example of perfection in imperfection. As Arthur is imperfect in his perfection, so Ida becomes perfect in her imperfection. Her honor, like Lancelot's, had stood "rooted in dishonor" ("Lancelot and Elaine" 871), and ironically, her seeming dishonor--the dissolution of her college--is rooted



firmly in honor.

Section CXIV of In Memoriam could be taken as a fitting comment on the Princess' quest for knowledge for the sake of power:

Who loves not knowledge? Who shall rail  
Against her beauty? May she mix  
With men and prosper! Who shall fix  
Her pillars? Let her work prevail.

But on her forehead sits a fire;  
She sets her forward countenance  
And leaps into the future chance,  
Submitting all things to desire.

Half-grown as yet, a child, and vain--  
She cannot fight the fear of death.  
What is she, cut from love and faith,  
But some wild Pallas from the brain

Of demons? fiery-hot to burst  
All barriers in her onward race  
For power. Let her know her place;  
She is the second, not the first.

A higher hand must make her mild,  
If all be not in vain, and guide  
Her footsteps, moving side by side  
With Wisdom, like the younger child;

For she is earthly of the mind,  
And Wisdom heavenly of the soul. (Underlining mine)

Since Knowledge is "earthly of the mind", she cannot be trusted by herself, as Tennyson also strikingly illustrates in "Lucretius"; but she is to be lauded when coupled with genuine Wisdom, which is the proper use of knowledge, and implies a sense of morality. Knowledge for Princess Ida becomes a "wild Pallas from the brain", and so remains until it is tempered and subdued by the truer wisdom of womanhood. Psyche, on the other hand seeks wisdom and love as well as knowledge, and is not content to subject herself to the intellect alone. For this reason, as we have observed, she incurs the wrath of





the Princess. The rift between the two women is healed when Ida begins to see that knowledge, though an integral part of life, is not meant to be an end in itself, nor merely a means to power. Her head achieves union with her heart as her knowledge is refined and ennobled "In reverence and in charity" (In Memoriam CXIV).

It may be of interest to note, before we leave our discussion of The Princess, that the union between the Prince and Ida involves not only a union of opposites in terms of sex, but a union of opposites in terms of temperament and character. The Princess possesses a high degree of intellectual firmness and a masculine determination to do heroic things. The Prince, on the other hand, is somewhat effeminate--and this is significant in the light of Tennyson's union with Hallam. The Prince is able to disguise himself as a woman without difficulty, and he is described as having ringlets "like a girl" (Part First 3). On the battle field he is not terribly heroic. Yet he is noble and courageous enough to win the love of the Princess. He saves the "Head" from drowning, physically and then spiritually; and by his love and the love of Psyche's child, Ida is softened and subdued without losing her nobility. She becomes a "low sun" in the ideal sense of the phrase. The Prince, in turn, is enraptured and inspired by the fiery and lofty nature of the Princess, but retains a certain feminine tenderness. The union seems to be the fulfilment of the Prince's own description of the ideal relationship between man and woman, only with a "twist". That is, it is the woman, in this case, who has the lofty intellect but is lacking in heart, while the Prince possesses the womanly tenderness and



sensitivity. Thus there is, to a certain extent, a reversal of roles in the poem, but this is part of the ambiguity, ambivalence, and seeming contradictions which pervade the poetry of Tennyson. Manhood must be rooted in womanhood, as honour must sometimes be rooted in dishonour, and perfection in imperfection. Until life and human nature change, we must do as T.S. Eliot says in "East Coker":

We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion  
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,  
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters  
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my  
beginning.

(204-209)



### CHAPTER III

#### THE REACH THROUGH DARKNESS

In Chapter II we studied the starvation of the soul in isolation; the emptiness, deterioration, and dissipation of any soul or being that aspires, or is constrained by circumstances, to be an entity separate and apart, a law unto itself. We have mainly centred our attention, however, on the Idylls and The Princess, and the quest for wholeness which is involved in those works. Although complete wholeness is not achieved in most of the works we examined in the preceding chapter, we have seen that in most of them there is a movement toward wholeness, toward union. The movement, though downward and seemingly negative, is for the most part positive and upward. It is a movement which is opposite to that which we explored in Chapter I. In the present chapter, however, we will be concerned with a reconciliation between these opposite movements--with the achievement of a state of relative equilibrium. Before I elaborate on this state of reconciliation and equilibrium, however, it should be made clear that this thesis has not attempted to explore all of Tennyson's poems that deal with the hell and damnation of souls cut off, either through circumstance, pride, or some other cause, from "the kindly ways of men" ("Tithonus" 29). "Enoch Arden", for example, is a study in itself of the desolation of a man cut off, first physically, and then mentally and spiritually, from his wife and children. When





he is rescued, after being stranded for years on a lonely island, he comes home to find himself confined to a waste land more desolate than that from which he came; for his wife has remarried in the interim, and his children have forgotten him. The physical separation he could endure, but not the alienation from love or the hope of love, and thus he dies.

"Aylmer's Field", to take another example, reveals the hell of a man and his wife who, through pride, cut themselves off from their daughter, thereby causing her death, and eventually alienating themselves from society as a whole. What was once the place of their wealth becomes a "waste field" (9), and Tennyson appropriately begins the poem thus:

Dust are our frames; and, gilded dust, our pride  
Looks only for a moment whole and sound,  
Like that long-buried body of the king,  
Found buried with his urns and ornaments,  
Which at a touch of light, an air of heaven,  
Slipt into ashes and was found no more.

(1-6 Underlining mine)

In many ways, the situations I have just described are related to Arthur's situation in the Idylls. Arthur's quest for wholeness is perhaps the most interesting and definitely the most central quest in that poem, and we will be coming back to Arthur from time to time. But let us shift our vision, in this present and final chapter, to another Arthur who was, to Tennyson, the epitome of wisdom and grace-- Arthur Hallam. It is my intention, however, to examine not only In Memoriam, but three other poems in connection with it, namely "Locksley Hall", Maud, and "The Ancient Sage"; for when these four poems are viewed together, a third pattern emerges which is relevant



to Tennyson's most intimate concerns and feelings, and hence to his own personal struggle for wholeness. One can sense, in the recurring patterns which we have already examined, a certain unresolved conflict, a spiritual hunger for fulfilment.\* But in Maud and In Memoriam, in particular, we come closer to the heart of the conflict, or at least we come closer to finding a direct statement of it, though it is still disguised. It will be our chief concern, in this final chapter, to explore this conflict and the partial resolution of it.

Although it may seem strange to some to group together two so apparently different poems as Maud and In Memoriam, they actually have some very important aspects in common. In the first place, they are both highly personal poems (as is also "Locksley Hall", according to one study)<sup>1</sup> although Tennyson undoubtedly objected strenuously to any such conclusion with regard to Maud. In fact, Maud is probably a much more personal expression of the poet's most intimate and private feelings than is In Memoriam, according to a convincing study by Ralph Wilson Rader entitled "Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genesis".<sup>2</sup> The poet expresses his personal feelings of grief fairly openly and directly in In Memoriam, for they are feelings which, though painful, can be objectified without any particular embarrassment or censure to the author. In Maud, however, the poet is forced to disguise his feelings under the mask of a dramatic

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\* Dr. A.H. Qureshi makes a similar observation in his essay, "The Waste Land Motif in Tennyson", 29.



persona. For, if the public found Maud to be shocking in its dramatic form, it would have been impossible for Tennyson to present the poem as an expression of his own personal thoughts and feelings. Not only would it have been unacceptable to the public, but it might even have been too painfully personal for the poet to have written.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of Tennyson's personal involvement in Maud lies in his obsessive insistence upon reading the poem aloud to his acquaintances. It is well known that the poem remained a favourite of Tennyson from the time of its creation until his death, and there is nothing strange in that; but what is strange is that he would insist, in some instances, on reading the poem aloud--and he always read it with an intensity of emotion that was inspiring, but at the same time betrayed feelings of close involvement with the hero and his problems.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it was apparently imperative that the part of the poet's inner being that has birth in Maud not only be expressed, but also be understood. It is almost as if Tennyson were trying to vindicate himself, like the old sailor in "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" by making the hero of Maud understood, for it seems that, in misunderstanding and condemning the hero of the poem, the public was also misunderstanding and condemning Tennyson--not simply because Tennyson created the hero, but also because he was the hero, to a certain extent.

Without going deeply into the biographical implications of Maud, which Mr. Rader has already done, let us be content to say that Tennyson's need for the poem to be understood stems from another more deep-seated need which, according to the evidence we have,<sup>4</sup> was a need





for love and for a genuine union with other individuals, particularly with a woman. The frustrations in love, the railings against society and its injustices, and the upward progress, at last, into a clearer though still imperfect light, are to be found not only in Maud, but in "Locksley Hall" and In Memoriam; and they are all bound up, evidently, with Tennyson's own frustrations and partial reconciliations. They are each expressions, in other words, of the same basic need which, as we shall see, was only partially satisfied in the course of the poet's life; the same basic inner wound which, though grown over with time, was never quite healed. Without attempting to be more specifically biographical than this, let us examine the poems.

The fundamental pattern which underlies "Locksley Hall", Maud and In Memoriam can be roughly outlined in the following manner: The loss of a loved one, either through death or rejection is followed by bitterness, disillusionment, doubt, and fear on the part of the bereaved or rejected person; but reconciliation and greater wholeness are ultimately achieved, either through reunion with the loved one on a higher plane, or through becoming united with mankind in a higher cause--through rising above the self. The recurrence of this pattern, when viewed in connection with the patterns traced in the foregoing chapters, brings to light a certain reconciliation between two extremes. In The Princess, we observed a movement toward wholeness, culminating in the perfect union between man and woman and between the head, heart and soul. In the Idylls, we traced a steady movement to the opposite extreme--to dissolution and dissipation on several levels of human existence. But in this third pattern, there is a kind



of reconciliation between these opposite extremes. The first extreme is beautiful and desirable, but generally impossible; the second is possible and much more probable, but not desirable; and the middle ground in which Tennyson seems to settle is a state of positive resignation somewhere between these two extremes; and it is with this middle ground of positive resignation that we will be mainly concerned in this chapter.

In "Locksley Hall", the pattern shown above is quite obvious and needs little explaining. The hero, a Byronic figure who foreshadows the hero of Maud, is jilted by his beloved--or rather, she weakly yields to the tyrannical will of her parents, and marries a richer man of their choosing. The hero, disillusioned, helpless and embittered, rails against the weakness of his beloved and against the evil standards of a society which, for the sake of materialism and pride, thwarts the truly fruitful union of souls. Eventually, however, his mood mellows and, after considering and then rejecting the idea of withdrawing to some savage tropical paradise akin to the land of the lotus-eaters, he becomes somewhat reconciled to the spirit of his age--the spirit of evolutionary change and scientific, if not moral, progress:

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward,  
forward let us range;  
Let the great world spin for ever down the  
ringing grooves of change. (181-82)

The ending of the poem, though apparently optimistic, is not altogether satisfying; for science, though definitely progressive, is materialistic and impersonal, and often shows little regard for human feelings or values. And it is precisely the over-emphasis on materialism and the disregard for spiritual values that cause the hero's dilemma. The hero's decision to go forward with the age,



therefore, is not a real answer to his needs or a solution to the evils of a materialistic society; it is a partial solution to the hero's ills, a compromise. To spend his whole life brooding over the evils of mankind would be to die inwardly, as the hero of Maud dies before he is "redeemed". It is therefore better to go forward with some kind of hope for an improvement in man, than to fall backward in despair.

It is not difficult to perceive parallels between "Locksley Hall" and the much later poem, Maud. As we have already indicated, the speakers of the two poems are much alike in temperament. They both suffer, moreover, from bitter disillusionment, caused by an acute awareness of the ills of the society in which they live. Though the initial disillusionment of the hero of Maud is not caused by rejection in love, it is caused by the agony and death which brutal materialism has brought upon his parents. Like the hero of "Locksley Hall", he rails long and loud against society. He is eventually mellowed for a time, however, not by the hope of scientific progress, but by a slowly-awakened love for Maud, a love which is reciprocated. For a time he is happy, being at least partially lifted above his old morbidness and bitterness; but before long the evil and tyrannical force of society again rears its ugly head in the shape of Maud's brother, and violence and death result. The brother is destroyed, but so are the peace and happiness which Maud and her lover shared for a brief interval. In striking out blindly at society, like Pelleas in the Idylls, the hero almost destroys himself; and it becomes evident that he actually does destroy Maud by his actions. Perhaps Maud and her





brother are, in a sense, two sides of the same personality, like Balin and Balan. As we discovered in the first chapter, beauty and nobility are often wed, in human nature, with bestiality, pride and blind passion; and to destroy one side of man's personality is perhaps to destroy the other.

The hero's mind, which even at the zenith of the hero's relationship with Maud, seems to border on the hysterical, becomes completely unbalanced through a deep sense of guilt (Part II, I, 1-4), after the slaying of Maud's brother. At first he is only bewildered and confused, but he gradually sinks into complete despair and madness. After an indefinite period of time, however, the hero regains a certain soundness of mind; and spurred to action by the memory of Maud's love, he joins with his countrymen in the cause of the Crimean war. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to interpret too literally the ending of the poem. For although the speaker is portrayed as finding greater wholeness and purpose through engaging in a specific war, it hardly seems reasonable that Tennyson advocated war as the answer to the evils of society. (That he did not is confirmed in the Memoir.)<sup>5</sup> The important thing to consider is not that it was the Crimean war or any other war, but that the hero has come to forget himself in a cause that he feels is greater than himself. Here as in "Locksley Hall" the solution arrived at is not perfect--and Tennyson seems to be telling us that there is no ideal or fully satisfying solution--but it is at least a partial solution to some of the hero's most basic problems, the most glaring of which is his selfishness.

It is very important to the issues we are considering that we understand the nature of the hero's response to Maud's love. Although



he finds a degree of wholeness and loses some of his morbid self-centredness, through his relationship to Maud, his love remains essentially selfish and somehow incomplete during the courtship and for some time after. For example, his selfishness and possessiveness are reflected in the words of the hero which occur after he has won Maud's love:

O young lord-lover, what sighs are those  
 For one that will never be thine?  
 But mine, but mine, so I sware to the rose,  
 "For ever and ever, mine."

(Part I, XXII, V)

The hero tends to become ensnared moreover, in the excess of sensual passion, as the abundant rose imagery implies. And it is probably his inability to rise above the passions that causes his latent madness to remain lurking in the background and later to become prominent, for the killing of Maud's brother is an act of selfish passion. In the grave scene, the hero attempts to lose himself by withdrawing deeper into himself, but in attempting to do so, he finds only shapes of death, the shadows of his own dead self.

As long as the hero's love remains selfish and possessive, he can only be partially redeemed. During the courtship, therefore, he continues to be haunted by the fear that his hopes will be destroyed, and by the thought of Maud's brother, the embodiment of all he hates in society. The hero is so painfully aware of his own shortcomings, that he is haunted even in his happiest and most triumphant moments by the shadow of death, failure, and madness. One can detect a fearful, almost hysterical tone beneath the outward merriment of these lines which occur at one of the happiest moments



of the poem:

So now I have sworn to bury  
 All this dead body of hate,  
 I feel so free and clear  
 By the loss of that dead weight,  
 That I should grow light-headed, I fear,  
 Fantastically merry,  
 But that her brother comes, like a blight  
 On my fresh hope, to the Hall tonight.  
 (Part I, XIX, 779-86)

Though he recognizes the morbidity and instability to which he is prone, the speaker clings to Maud's love, because he feels that it is his one hope of salvation from himself and from "a selfish grave" (Part I, XVI, 559). Yet, even as he looks to Maud to save him from himself, he is being selfish; for it is his own salvation that he is considering, not Maud's. It is not until after the indefinite period of madness following the duel that he is able to think of others before himself. Exactly how the morbidity and selfishness are finally purged from his mind and soul we are not shown; and perhaps this is one of the weaknesses of the poem, but we must suppose that it is through the fires of suffering and remorse, and through the memory of Maud's love. However that may be, he somehow ascends out of his dark self into the healthier light of day. For this reason, the grave scene in Maud is especially significant, not only because it portrays so vividly the workings of a deranged mind, but also because it is symbolic of what happens to the hero. For, in the last section of the poem, he is resurrected from the grave which is himself. Once he has conquered his extreme selfishness, he is able to become a more whole and sane individual, to find release from the dungeon of his thoughts. He does not forget Maud or the sweet influence of her love, which has





been "in a weary world [his] one thing bright" (Part III 17); but her love has now become, instead of a possession to be hoarded, an inspiration to enable him to become one with his kind, and to accept whatever "doom" may be assigned (Part III 59-60). He loses himself, in fulfilment of his earlier wish: "And ah for a man to arise in me, / That the man I am may cease to be" (Part I, X, 395-96)---which is essentially a suicide-wish. And, in a sense, he does commit suicide; for his old self lies buried deep in a forgotten grave, along with the "dead body of hate."

We have seen in Maud and "Locksley Hall", as well as The Idylls of the King, that love, like death, is ambivalent. It can be the means to the highest kind of fulfilment, but it can also be the means of great sorrow and destruction, because of its close association and involvement with the passions. The hero of Maud finds fulfilment of a kind through love, but Arthur in the Idylls finds only unhappiness and disillusionment, because he loves the wrong kind of woman. Elaine also is destroyed, for the same reason, and also Pelleas. Love that is given but not requited is not fulfilling; and love that degenerates into selfish passion is no less than destructive. The kind of love that both endures and redeems is that which the hero of Maud, in part, attains to, and which is described in the following passage from Wordsworth's The Prelude:

In some green bower  
Rest, and be not alone, but have thou there  
The One who is thy choice in all the world:  
There linger, listening, gazing, with delight  
Impassioned, but delight how pitiable!  
Unless this love by a still higher love



Be hallowed, love that breathes not without awe;  
 Love that adores, but on the knees of prayer,  
 By heaven inspired; that frees from chains the soul,  
Lifted, in union with the purest, best,  
Of earth-born passions, on the wings of praise  
 Bearing a tribute to the Almighty's Throne.

(Book Fourteenth 176-87 Underlining mine)

It is not until the "earth-born" passions are redeemed by a higher love that the soul can find the freedom which makes complete wholeness of being possible.

Like the hero of Maud, Tennyson himself underwent a kind of redemption, which is recorded in In Memoriam (though, as we suggested earlier, the redemption in Maud is also a definite reflection of Tennyson's quest for wholeness through love). Since the sections of In Memoriam were not written in the order in which they appear, however, it is impossible to trace Tennyson's spiritual development in any systematic way. It is true that one can trace a fairly steady progression, in the poem, from the grave to a glimpse of the eternities, from darkness to spiritual light, but to suppose that the orderly arrangement of the sections in the poem is a true reflection of Tennyson's adjustment to Hallam's death would be erroneous. It is not at all likely that there was anything systematic or steady about the poet's development between the time of Hallam's death and the time of his belated marriage to Emily Sellwood. Tennyson was not stable enough, especially after his beloved friend's death, for that kind of development.<sup>6</sup> That the poet did evolve to a certain level of spiritual fulfilment is most certainly true, since there is ample evidence that points toward this fact, but that evolution should not be regarded as a steady upward movement. For this reason, we will



concern ourselves only with the broad outlines of Tennyson's development as it is revealed in In Memoriam.

It is well known that Tennyson was of a remarkably dependent nature, probably due to the insecurity of his early years with his unstable father. His friendship with Hallam provided, for a time, the stabilizing influence which he needed. As Christ was a light to his disciples, so Hallam was a guiding light to Tennyson; and this comparison becomes increasingly apt when we read the poet's descriptions of the character of Hallam. Two passages in particular are worth looking at. Section CIX of In Memoriam describes Hallam's character and personal attributes thus:

Heart-affluence in discursive talk  
From household fountains never dry;  
The critic clearness of an eye  
That saw thro' all the Muses' walk;

Seraphic intellect and force  
To seize and throw the doubts of man;  
Impassion'd logic, which outran  
The hearer in its fiery course;

High nature amorous of the good,  
But touch'd by no ascetic gloom;  
And passion pure in snowy bloom  
Through all the years of April blood;

A love of freedom rarely felt,  
Of freedom in her regal seat  
Of England; not the schoolboy heat,  
The blind hysterics of the Celt;

And manhood fused with female grace  
In such a sort, the child would twine  
A trustful hand, unask'd, in thine,  
And find his comfort in thy face;

And again, in section CX:

Thy converse drew us with delight,  
The men of rathe and riper years;





The feeble soul, a haunt of fears,  
Forgot his weakness in they sight.

On thee the loyal-hearted hung,  
The proud was half disam'd of pride,  
Nor cared the serpent at thy side  
To flicker with his double tongue.

The stern were mild when thou wert by,  
The flippant put himself to school.  
And heard thee, and the brazen fool  
Was soften'd, and he knew not why.

(Underlining mine, here and above)

In Arthur Hallam, Tennyson saw, or thought he saw, the perfect balance between the intellect and the passions, between the flesh and the soul--which, along with perfect love, is sought for in vain in the Idylls. If Tennyson was not deluded--and there is evidence that he was not<sup>7</sup>--Hallam came closer to the ideal manhood than does King Arthur in the Idylls. The fact that Hallam never lived to complete his anticipated mission on earth may be the reason behind the essentially pessimistic and tragic tone of the Idylls. However, that poem reveals a reconciliation to imperfection and to death which perhaps finds its highest expression in In Memoriam. Tennyson came to realize, probably more through Hallam's death than anything else, that man's progress on earth is as cyclical as day and night; that man's quest for perfection, on any level of earthly experience is never really linear, and cannot be linear until human nature and the nature of life itself are somehow changed. The darkness, therefore, is as much a part of man's progression as the light, just as doubt is essential to the attainment of true faith. This truth concerning the necessity of opposition<sup>\*</sup> was learned partly through the example

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<sup>\*</sup> By opposition I mean not only opposites or contrarities, but also the adversities against which man strives.



set by Hallam, and partly, no doubt, through his own struggles with the questions of the meaning of life and with the darker side of his own nature. Section XCVI states clearly the poet's findings on the need for opposition in all things:

You say, but with no touch of scorn,  
Sweet-hearted, you, whose light-blue eyes  
Are tender over drowning flies,  
You tell me doubt is Devil-born.

I know not: one indeed I knew  
In many a subtle question versed,  
Who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,  
But ever strove to make it true;

Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,  
At last he beat his music out.  
There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

He fought his doubts and gathered strength,  
He would not make his judgement blind,  
He faced the spectres of the mind  
And laid them; thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own,  
And Power was with him in the night,  
Which makes the darkness and the light,  
And dwells not in the light alone.

But in the darkness and the cloud,  
As over Sinai's peaks of old,  
While Israel made their gods of gold,  
Altho' the trumpet blew so loud.

(Underlining mine)

God is the maker of the darkness as well as the light, and both are necessary for man's development and progression. What man mistakes for God's cruelty, therefore, is really his love. Tennyson's realization of this fact, however, came slowly, after much suffering and mental anguish. At Hallam's death, he must have felt somewhat like the disciples of Christ felt when their Lord had been crucified



and put away in a tomb. Not knowing what to do, each one went his own way, and the work of spreading Christianity would have ceased at that point, if Christ had not returned and commissioned the disciples to go forward. Even so, Tennyson seems to have been temporarily lost without Hallam. He dwells, in the early sections of In Memoriam, upon the grave and the corruption of the body; he seems to "grow incorporate" into the old yew-tree, and feels with root-like fingers among the bones of the dead. His mind is confused, and the very universe seems to reflect this confusion:

'The stars,' she [Sorrow] whispers, 'blindly run;  
A web is woven across the sky;  
From out waste places comes a cry,  
And murmurs from the dying sun;

And all the phantom, Nature, stands--  
With all the music of her tone,  
And hollow echo of my own,--  
A hollow form with empty hands.' (III)

Lost in a spiritual waste land, like the hero of Maud after the loss of his beloved, Tennyson dwells upon the physical remains of Hallam, in the early sections of the poem, rather than upon his immortal spirit. It is the physical presence of Hallam that he longs for, for no words of reassurance could replace that presence. He often longs to hear the voice of Hallam, and to grasp his physical hand.\* But Hallam, unlike Christ, did not come back in physical form from the grave, to give the poet the kind of reassurance and renewed companionship he longed for. Hallam did come back in spirit-form, however,

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\* As Eleanor Mattes points out, the references to Hallam's hands are numerous in the poem. See her In Memoriam: The Way of a Soul, 53-54.





according to the account given in section XCV.

Section XCV is the focal point of the whole poem, not only because the experience related therein gave some profound assurance and comfort to Tennyson, but also because it fuses together light and darkness, life and death, day and night, flesh and soul, and past and future. All of these come together for one "infinite moment"--to use Browning's term--a moment of truth. It is a moment of truth precisely because of this blending of opposites and diversities; for in truth, which is eternal, there is no past, present and future, no night and day, no death and life, but all is one eternal "Now", "Tho' we, thin minds, who creep from thought to thought,/ Break into "Thens" and "Whens" the eternal Now" ("The Ancient Sage" 103-4). Men fail to understand or comprehend truth, therefore, because they view it in fragments; they look upon the parts and not upon the whole, and such is perhaps the basic cause behind the conflict between science and religion. But the poet, at least in moments of spiritual revelation--moments of "The Passion of the Past" ("The Ancient Sage" 219)--is able to fuse all opposing and seemingly irreconcilable elements, and to see all things in their true perspective.

Throughout most of In Memoriam, however, Tennyson also spends his time looking at fragments. He considers this theory from geology, and that from another science, and another from philosophy, and remains confused and relatively unassured. His groping in the darkness seems to have been necessary, however, to prepare him mentally and spiritually for the revelation which he describes in section XCV. In that revelation, he saw not so much through his own eyes as through Hallam's,



and he therefore saw life and the universe from the higher perspective which the latter had attained to. Thus, by reaching into the past, through Hallam's letters, Tennyson reached into the future, or into realms in which past and future become irrelevant:

So word by word, and line by line,  
The dead man touch'd me from the past,  
And all at once it seem'd at last  
The living soul was flashed on mine,

And mine in this was wound, and whirl'd  
About Empyrean heights of thought,  
And came on that which is, and caught  
The deep pulsations of the world,

Aeonian music measuring out  
The steps of Time--the shocks of Chance--  
The blows of Death. At length my trance  
Was cancell'd, stricken through with doubt.  
(XCV Underlining mine)

Tennyson's questioning nature would not allow him to enjoy the spiritual intercourse for very long; for doubt, although it has its place in the scheme of things, must be totally overcome before one can experience "communion with the dead" (XCIV); for,

when the heart is full of din,  
And doubt beside the portal waits,  
They can but listen at the gates,  
And hear the household jar within. (XCIV)

Yet, for a brief moment, the "household jar" within Tennyson's mind and soul was still enough to admit the presence of Hallam; and though the vision was soon "stricken through", he nevertheless came upon "that which is"--the eternal truth of our existence. Some may tend to discount the meaningfulness of this experience because of the vagueness of Tennyson's words; but to say so is to declare that one can only experience that which can be clearly translated into words. Tennyson



realized the inadequacy of words, but he did not discount the importance of the experience:

Vague words! but ah, how hard to frame  
In matter-moulded forms of speech,  
Or even for intellect to reach  
Thro' memory that which I became;

Till now the doubtful dusk reveal'd  
The knolls once more where, couch'd at ease,  
The white kine glimmer'd, and the trees  
Laid their dark arms about the field;

And suck'd from out the distant gloom  
A breeze began to tremble o'er  
The large leaves of the sycamore,  
And fluctuate all the still perfume,

And gathering freshlier overhead,  
Rock'd the full-foliaged elms, and swung  
The heavy-folded rose, and flung  
The lilies to and fro, and said,

'The dawn, the dawn,' and died away;  
And East and West, without a breath,  
Mixt their dim lights, like life and death,  
To broaden into boundless day.

(XCV Underlining mine)

The coming of the dawn, on this occasion, also marks the arrival of a spiritual dawn in Tennyson. From this time forward, he seems to have brooded less and less about the darker things of the past. He still longed for Hallam's presence, but thought more of the future than of the past:

Yet less of sorrow lives in me  
For days of happy commune dead,  
Less yearning for the friendship fled  
Than some strong bond which is to be. (CXVI)

Tennyson's thoughts, by the end of In Memoriam, have turned from introspection and brooding upon the loss to himself, to the happy fulfilment of a young couple through the union of marriage. Having





renewed his union with Hallam, he was able to turn his thoughts outward toward others. The poem ends, appropriately, with the bride, the symbol of love and fruitful union, standing with

Her feet. . . on the dead;  
Their pensive tablets round her head,  
And the most living words of life

Breathed in her ear. (CXXXI)

These words suggest the triumph of love over personal grief and spiritual death. They also echo the opening section, which depicts the triumph of Christ--or the love of Christ--over physical death: "Thou madest Death, and lo thy foot/ Is on the skull which thou hast made" (Prologue). It is through the love of the living that the dead continue to live on earth; and it is sometimes through the love of the dead that the living are redeemed from the grave of anguish and despair.

As the hero of Maud is partially redeemed by Maud's love and the memory of it, even so Tennyson achieved at least partial fulfilment through Hallam's love and the memory of that love. This is not to suggest that Tennyson's faith became so strong as to be absolutely unwavering. Section XCV itself suggests otherwise. Nor did he claim to have any absolute knowledge of the eternities by reason of his "mystical" experience. But he did manage to acquire, if not complete spiritual wholeness, at least the faith to

lift from out of dust  
A voice as unto him that hears,  
A cry above the conquer'd years  
To one that with us works, and trust,  
.....  
With faith that comes of self-control,  
The truths that never can be proved  
Until we close with all we loved,  
And all we flow from, soul in soul.

(CXXXI, Underlining mine)



The last line of this passage is reminiscent of the song from The Princess which states that "Our echoes roll from soul to soul,/ And grow for ever and for ever" (Part Third, 361-62). The philosophy of the passage as a whole, however, is more closely aligned with that expressed in "The Ancient Sage". The comments of the poet on "the faith that comes of self-control" and "the truths that never can be proved," particularly remind one of key passages from that shorter poem. At one point, the sage says:

Thou canst not prove the Nameless, O my son,  
Nor canst thou prove the world thou movest in,  
Thou canst not prove that thou art body alone,  
Nor canst thou prove that thou art spirit alone,  
Nor canst thou prove that thou art both in one.  
Thou canst not prove thou art immortal, no,  
Nor yet that thou art mortal--nay my son,  
Thou canst not prove that I, who speak with thee,  
Am not thyself in converse with thyself,  
For nothing worthy proving can be proven,  
Nor yet disproven. (57-67)

The old seer's assertion that "Thou canst not prove that I, who speak to thee/ Am not thyself in converse with thyself" is rather ironic; for, in a sense, the sage is the older Tennyson in converse with his younger, more doubt-tormented self, or at least with a darker side of his own nature. The fact that the two opposing voices, unlike those in "The Two Voices", come from two separate individuals suggests the transcendence of age and wisdom over the conflicts and doubts of youth. The sage, who sounds very much like Tennyson himself, does not claim to have all the answers; nor does he claim to have resolved all doubt, but merely urges the youth to "cleave to the sunnier side of doubt,/ And cling to faith beyond the forms of faith" (68-69). Nevertheless, the old seer, by stressing the positive rather than the negative side



of life, as the heroes of Maud and "Locksley Hall" come to do, has achieved a state of relative serenity and peace. He has learned to live at peace with himself and with the perplexing ambiguities and frustrations of life; and he has arrived at this state of comparative peace and faith largely through self-control, through mastering the passions. In the clearness of mind which accompanies self-mastery, he has come to see the necessity of opposites and opposition in the scheme of things. He says to the young poet:

And Day and Night are children of the Sun,  
 And idle gleams to thee are light to me.  
 Some say, the Light was father of the Night,  
 And some, the Night was father of the Light,  
 No night, no day!--I touch thy world again--  
 No ill, no good! such counter-terms, my son,  
 Are border-races, holding each its own  
 By endless war. But night enough is there  
 In yon dark city. Get thee back; and since  
 The key to that weird casket, which for thee  
 But holds a skull, is neither thine nor mine,  
 But in the hand of what is more than man,  
Or in man's hand when man is more than man,  
 Let be thy wail, and help thy fellow-men,  
 And make thy gold thy vassal, not thy king,  
 And fling free alms into the beggar's bowl,  
 And send the day into the darken'd heart.

(245-61 Underlining mine)

The sage also advises the young poet to avoid drowning himself "with flies in honeyed wine" (268), and to "leave the hot swamp of voluptuousness" (277), which is a cloud between the young man and the Nameless, but not a benevolent cloud like that over Sinai:

And more--think well! Do-well will follow thought,  
 And in the fatal sequence of this world  
An evil thought may soil thy children's blood;  
But curb the beast would cast thee in the mire,  
 And leave the hot swamp of voluptuousness,  
 A cloud between the Nameless and thyself,  
 And lay thine uphill shoulder to the wheel,  
 And climb the Mount of Blessing, whence, if thou





Look higher, then--perchance--thou mayest--beyond  
 A hundred ever-rising mountain lines,  
And past the range of Night and Shadow--see  
The high-heaven dawn of more than mortal day  
 Strike on the Mount of Vision!

(273-85 Underlining mine)

Here, as in "The Palace of Art", The Princess, and Maud, Tennyson stresses the achievement of wholeness and peace through losing oneself in the service of others and through curbing and refining the passions.

"The Ancient Sage" seems to be a summing up of all of the most central themes which we have thus far explored. We have already seen that it is by the "hot swamp" of sensuality and self-indulgence that the vision of Camelot is obscured in the minds of most of Arthur's people. The ending of "The Ancient Sage" reminds one of the words of Arthur when he sums up the folly of his knights and of their quests for the Grail. Arthur says:

And some among you held that if the King  
 Had seen the sight he would have sworn the vow.  
 Not easily, seeing that the King must guard  
 That which he rules, and is but as the hind  
 To whom a space of land is given to plow,  
 Who may not wander from the allotted field  
 Before his work be done, but, being done,  
 Let visions of the night or of the day  
 Come as they will; and many a time they come,  
 Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,  
 This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,  
 This air that smites his forehead is not air  
 But vision--yea this very hand and foot--  
 In moments when he feels he cannot die,  
 And knows himself no vision to himself,  
 Nor the high God a vision, nor that One  
 Who rose again. ("The Holy Grail" 899-915)

We have in this passage, however, an added dimension. For, the ancient sage speaks of transcending the swamp of darkness and sensuality to catch a glimpse of the light of vision upon the heights; but King Arthur



speaks of ascending beyond or into the vision itself--ascending into absolute knowledge, in which one not only sees the light but is enveloped in it, is a part of it. The vision, in other words, becomes the reality. Tennyson never ascended so high, nor does the ancient sage, but Hallam apparently did, and this fact links King Arthur of the Idylls with Arthur of In Memoriam.

"The Ancient Sage" is linked to In Memoriam for another reason, however: it is a poem about disillusionment, death, and a reconciliation to both of these. For this reason, among others, it is also closely associated with Maud, as an examination of the following passage from "The Ancient Sage" reveals:

The years that when my Youth began  
Had set the lily and the rose  
By all my ways where'er they ran,  
Have ended mortal foes;  
My rose of love forever gone,  
My lily of truth and trust--  
They made her lily and rose in one,  
And changed her into dust.  
A rose-tree planted in my grief,  
And growing on her tomb,  
Her dust is greening in your leaf,  
Her blood is in your bloom.  
O slender lily waving there,  
And laughing back the light,  
In vain you tell me 'Earth is fair'  
When all is dark as night.  
(155-70 Underlining mine)

As Mr. Rader points out in the work referred to earlier in this chapter, there are three women,<sup>8</sup> apparently, with whom the young man has been involved. One he associates with the rose, the symbol, especially in the Idylls and Maud, of sensual beauty and its inherent destructive power. The other he compares to a lily, for she supposedly embodied the spiritual qualities of "truth and trust." The third was



a woman who combined all of these qualities, physical and spiritual.\* The young man has somehow become estranged from both of his first two loves, and the third was lost through death. The cynical youth, lacking any kind of faith, beholds the final end of the flesh, yet continues to glut the flesh and starve the soul. He tells the spiritual lily, "In vain you tell me 'Earth is fair' / When all is dark as night." All is darkness and confusion to him, as it was to Tennyson upon the death of Hallam; though Tennyson, fortunately, had restraint enough to keep from abandoning himself completely to wild self-indulgence or to self-destruction of some other kind.

Just as the words of the young poet seem to be the most negative thoughts of Tennyson himself, so the words of the seer appear to be the summing up of the most important fragments of wisdom which Tennyson accumulated during the years of the creation of In Memoriam. Tennyson sometimes referred to In Memoriam as "The Way of a Soul"<sup>9</sup>, and that is what it is--the reflection of a spiritual journey which ended not in complete faith or complete wholeness, but in a certain reconciliation to things as they are. This resignation involves an acceptance of the fact of imperfection, ambivalence, and ambiguity, but it is a positive resignation which continues to move forward, not one that sinks into negative despair.

Before we close our discussion of the quest for wholeness in

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\* Rader takes up the probable biographical implications of these three women, and although we will not concern ourselves with that kind of an interpretation here, it should be noted that the women correspond to women who influenced Tennyson's own life.





Tennyson, and in particular our discussion of In Memoriam, it is well to consider a statement which Ralph Rader makes in his book on the biographical genesis of Maud:

In Memoriam is a spiritual record of those years in Tennyson's life which eventually found another, more covert record in Maud; but the first poem, unlike the second so long delayed, involved no feeling which Tennyson could not contemplate with equanimity and come to clear and conscious terms with; and so, writing over the whole extent of those years, in moments as I believe of spiritual freedom and quietude, he could give his best private feeling full and appropriate public expression, while his more ambivalent and less conscious emotions remained in uneasy suspension until the crisis of success forced their unsatisfactory discharge in Maud.<sup>10</sup>

Although it confirms what we observed at the beginning of our discussion of Maud, this statement also tends to raise some doubts as to the validity of the solutions Tennyson seems to have found to the problems and doubts raised in In Memoriam. It implies that In Memoriam, instead of being the expression of the resolution of the conflicts and turbulent mental states expressed in Maud, is merely a manifestation of a temporary suspension of them. On the other hand, if Tennyson was able, in the darker years of his separation from Hallam and from Emily Sellwood, to suspend the more paradoxical and enigmatic side of his nature long enough to examine, without morbid railing or dark despair, the basic questions of human existence, and emerge with at least a partial solution to his ills, then In Memoriam is so much the greater for this reason. Moreover, as Arthur J. Carr points out, Tennyson admits that there are elements of his melancholia that are "not entirely resolved in conscious grief."<sup>11</sup> He writes in the elegy:

But there is more than I can see,  
And what I see I leave unsaid,



Nor speak it, knowing Death has made  
His darkness beautiful with thee. (LXXIV)

Tennyson apparently refused to mar the beauty of Hallam's memory with the more morbid and suppressed conflicts which find expression in Maud, but reserved only his most noble sentiments for his "Dear friend, far-off" (CXXIX).

Tennyson's personal involvement in Maud, in any case, does not invalidate the relative assurance and equilibrium reflected in In Memoriam; for Maud, although it probably expresses the negative side of the poet's own nature, ends with the positive assurance of the redeeming power of love and the necessity of going forward with the rest of mankind; and that assurance, as we have seen, is nobly reiterated in the mature, philosophic poem, "The Ancient Sage". Though Tennyson was undoubtedly morbidly sensitive to the darkness and pain of our fallen world, his major poems are more positive than negative, and point forward instead of backward. They all express, ultimately, the sentiments expressed in section CVIII of In Memoriam:

I will not shut me from my kind,  
And, lest I stiffen into stone,  
I will not eat my heart alone,  
Nor feed with sighs a passing wind:

What profit lies in barren faith,  
And vacant yearning, tho' with might  
To scale the heaven's highest height,  
Or dive below the wells of death?

What find I in the highest place,  
But mine own phantom chanting hymns?  
And on the depths of death there swims  
The reflex of a human face.

I'll rather take what fruit may be  
Of sorrow under human skies.

(Underlining mine)



From the "Empyreal heights of thought" (XCV) where he stood with the spirit of Hallam, Tennyson descended, like King Arthur, Princess Ida, Tithonus, and others we have discussed, to partake of the fruit of joy and sorrow--the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil--with the rest of mankind. And in so doing he gained the wisdom which can only come through the sorrow of experience.





### Footnotes

Introduction:

<sup>1</sup>Mark 2:17

<sup>2</sup>Valerie Pitt, Tennyson Laureate, 51.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Collected Letters, III, 216.

<sup>4</sup>John Killham ed., Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson, 76.

<sup>5</sup>William Shakespeare, Hamlet, III, ii, 21-22.

<sup>6</sup>John Keats, Selected Poems and Letters, 279.

Chapter I

<sup>1</sup>Edward Frieson, "Deception in Tennyson's Idylls of the King" See the whole thesis.

<sup>2</sup>Conde Benoist Pallen, The Meaning of The Idylls of the King. The whole work deals with the conflict between sense and soul.

<sup>3</sup>Clyde de L. Ryals, From the Great Deep, 142.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>5</sup>Henry Van Dyke, Poetry of Tennyson, 217.

Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>A.S.P. Woodhouse, The Poet and his Faith, 225.

<sup>2</sup>Elton Edward Smith, The Two Voices, 71.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>4</sup>John Killham ed., Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson, 241.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>6</sup>Edith Hamilton, Mythology, 92.



## Chapter III

- <sup>1</sup>Ralph Wilson Rader, Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genesis, 57.
- <sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.
- <sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 1-2.
- <sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 76-77.
- <sup>5</sup>Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son Vol. I, 401.
- <sup>6</sup>Ralph Wilson Rader, 97-111.
- <sup>7</sup>A.C. Bradley, A Commentary on Tennyson's In Memoriam, 5.
- <sup>8</sup>Ralph Wilson Rader, 102.
- <sup>9</sup>Hallam Tennyson, 393.
- <sup>10</sup>Ralph Wilson Rader, 121.
- <sup>11</sup>John Killham ed., Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson, 55.



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### 1. List of Abbreviations

EJ	English Journal
ELH	English Literary History
HAB	Humanities Association Bulletin
JEGP	Journal of English and Germanic Philology
MLN	Modern Language Notes
MP	Modern Philology
N&Q	Notes and Queries
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association
VN	Victorian Newsletter
VP	Victorian Poetry

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